



6

Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

★ Fremd Torturchen ★

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



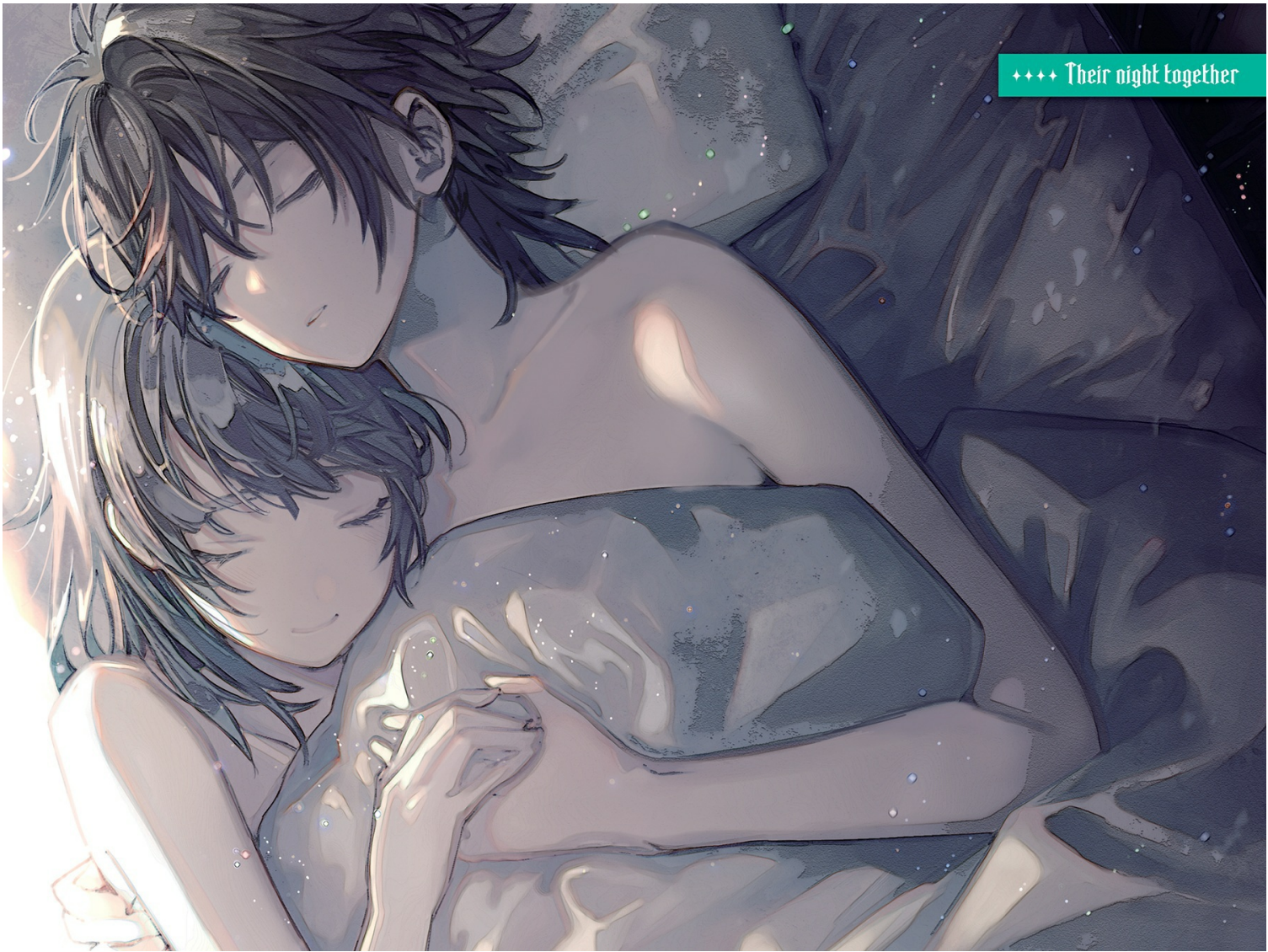
Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

Fremd Torturchen





++++ Their night together

★★★★ Alone





Kaito Sena's Diary



It's weird—the sky looks clear in some places, but in others, it's full of black clouds and underlings. It's...cold, I guess? Whatever this is, I discovered it while searching the castle, so I have taken it. As far as demon battles go... it kinda feels like this is the big one?

A bunch of stuff ended up happening, and Hina gave me this diary, so I thought I'd write an entry. Honestly, I had no idea that Elisabeth, the Butcher, and Jeanne had gone and written in it after Hina had taken a break. The fact that it's my turn makes me feel weirdly self-conscious. I can really empathize with the passage the Butcher wrote: "At the very least, I hope that my acquaintances will be able to keep smiling for as long as possible." He betrayed everyone. But knowing that, I can tell he wrote that section from the heart. When I read Jeanne's entry, I can tell she was thinking about Izabella in her own way, even back then. And Elisabeth... When she was writing that entry, she was probably seriously planning on getting executed. "I shall return Kaito to you in good spirits," she wrote. Come back in good spirits yourself, dammit. Man, now that I think about it, this entry of mine has been kind of all over the place. Anyone reading it for the first time probably won't be able to make heads or tails of it. I mean, can you even call something like this a diary entry? But to be honest, I think that's fine. There's just one thing I want whoever reads this to remember. I was here. Everyone important to me was here. Please don't forget that. No matter what happens after this.

Today's menu Honey, nuts, and cheese on crackers, as well as an herb salad and some wine
Elisabeth's reaction Here's to her being able to drink wine like this again
Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant You know, I feel like we could have done without this header
Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant 2 It used to be "Today's Master Kaito," but someone went and changed it

And with that, maybe it's time I finished up this diary entry. In a few hours, morning will be here, whether I want it to or not.



Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

6

Torture Princess

— fremd Torturchen —

**YEN
ON**
New York

Copyright

Torture Princess: Fremd Torturchen Volume 6

Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by Saki Ukai

Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher Cover art by Saki Ukai

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

ISEKAI GOMON HIME Volume 6 Fremd Torturchen ©Keishi Ayasato 2018

First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: December 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Ayasato, Keishi, author. | Ukai, Saki, illustrator. | Thrasher, Nathaniel Hiroshi, translator.

Title: Torture princess: fremd torturchen / Keishi Ayasato ; illustration by Saki Ukai ; translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher.

Other titles: Isekai gomon hime. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2019— Identifiers: LCCN 2019005330 | ISBN 9781975304690 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975304713 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975304737 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975304751 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975304775 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975304799 (v. 6 : pbk.) Classification: LCC PL867.5.Y36 I8413 2019 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019005330>

ISBNs: 978-1-97530479-9 (paperback) 978-1-9753-0480-5 (ebook)

E3-20201116-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Records of a Civil Official](#)

[1 A Pact with the Imperial Princess](#)

[2 On the Northernmost Shore](#)

[3 The Saint Awakens](#)

[4 A Tale from Long, Long Ago](#)

[5 The Battle Against the Fourth Wave](#)

[6 Vlad and the Kaiser](#)

[7 The World's Inherent Tragedy](#)

[8 At the Torture Princess's Castle](#)

[9 Kaito and His Bride](#)

[10 Ragnarok](#)

[11 The Mad King and the Kaiser](#)

[12 Kaito Sena's Story](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Part 2—The Torture Princess Arc: Prologue](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

**Records
of a
Civil Official**

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n



Records of a Civil Official

This is a record of our defeat. And at the same time, it is also a record of how we are yet biding our time.

The two pillars, God and Diablo, that rose up at the World's End brought destruction down upon us all. The first wave of underlings released from the Diablo pillar spread far and wide, sowing slaughter and mayhem in their wake. But it is believed the second wave and those that'll come thereafter will be the real threats.

Although the residents of the Capital have survived countless demon attacks, the following waves of underlings boasted such numbers that the people stood no chance. Normally, that would have been sufficient to mark this world's doom.

Normally, that is.

However, at that very moment, the joint meeting among the humans, demi-humans, and beastfolk bore fruit. When the various races' representatives received word of a second wave, they set aside their grudges and established a united front. An army was formed with the saints at its center, and they were able to shoot down over half the underlings before they landed on human soil. However, victory is far from ours.

At present, we're suffering countless minor defeats due to our fatigue and eroded military strength. Does victory await us beyond our present hardships? Or are we perhaps fated to lose? And if so, what will the ensuing destruction and rebuilding be like? We don't even know what form the end will take.

After all, our enemies are none other than God and Diablo.

The battle we have undertaken is an act of sacrilege, the likes of which have never before occurred, perhaps not even in the world before ours.

The beliefs we have held for countless ages are crumbling away, and our

spiritual foundations have been shattered. After casting the Creators aside, will life be able to persist as it has in the past? At this rate, nothing about our futures is certain.

Everything described above details the brutal nature of the situation we find ourselves in.

From here, I will be recording my personal ramblings. However, that is precisely why I hope you will remember them.

Even if everything perishes, even if everything comes to an end, even if these records are annihilated in the rebuilding, I hope someone, somewhere, remembers us.

Our foolish resistance, our futile struggle—all of it is proof that we lived.

Even if there is no possible way to know that, please—

—I beg of you.

Perhaps I've gotten too sentimental. Allow me to change the subject—the fact that the three races joined together and formed a united defensive front came as a great shock to me. Rumor has it that the Church was involved in the erection of the two pillars. Because of that, I was certain that the first imperial princess of the beastfolk would rise up against humanity.

Could it be that something happened at the meeting, something that a lowly public official such as myself could never even begin to imagine?

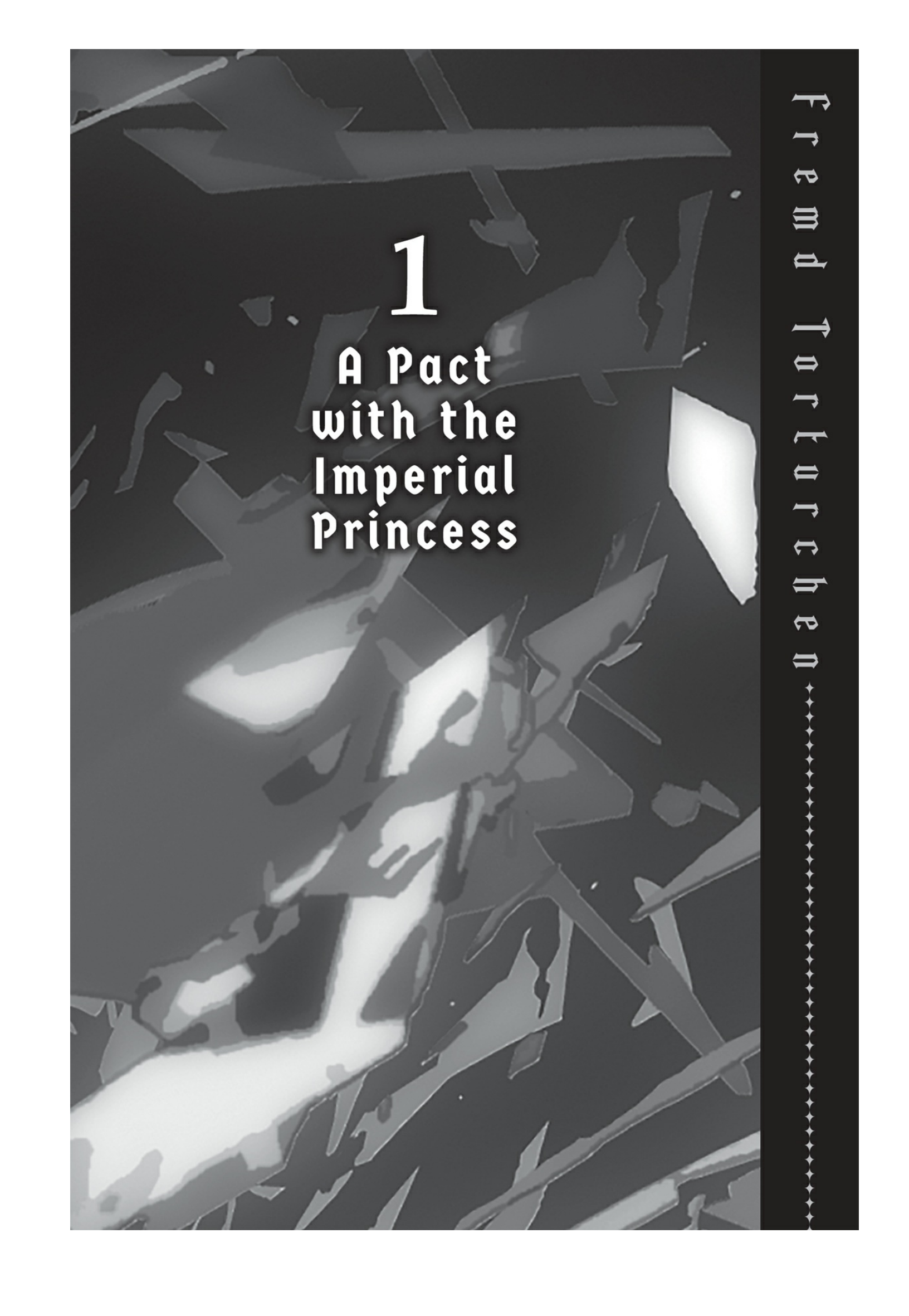
A calamitous act of tyranny, one that threatens to destroy everything?

Or perhaps something resembling a miracle?

Uyade Ula Forstlast

~~~~~  
The beastwoman selected by the Forest King to serve as the second imperial princess. She has a private army in order to deal with matters of public security, and the way she's used her own funds to maintain the towns under her supervision and manage the system preventing the rivers from flooding has earned her the moniker of the Wise Wolf. At present, she receives fervent support from the people.





# 1

A Pact  
with the  
Imperial  
Princess

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n



# 1

## A Pact with the Imperial Princess

The location was the joint meeting among the three races, which would shape the fate of the world.

Standing atop the pure-white round table, Kaito Sena lorded over his surroundings. His hundreds of swords were leveled at the noses of those who had assembled here to represent their races. The blades glinted keenly as Kaito carefully kept them suspended in the air with a thought. He'd created each and every one of them with magic.

In his hand, he held but a single jet-black long sword, and he pointed it at the members of the assembly. He slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"Humanity, beastfolk, and demi-humans are all equal. Every living creature is ignorant, every living creature is like a stupid animal, and every living creature is precious. So I'll promise you this. I'm gonna keep you all alive. I'm gonna save the world. And that's why..."

Then the boy who had died meaninglessly in another world made his grand declaration.

"...just for now, I'm king. So obey me."

There was no reply. Some people stared at him in surprise, some people trembled in fear, and some people calmly stared at his blades. While their expressions were varied, their faces all bore the shade of a common mutual understanding.

Kaito could no doubt tell what they were thinking: *The moment we oppose him, the blades will end us; if we give the wrong answer, he'll split open our noses, pierce our brains, and dump our gray matter on the floor; I can tell from the quiet passion and determination in that insurrectionist boy's face that he'll do it.*

Everyone present was highly capable, and together, they formed the nucleus of society. It made perfect sense that none of them would be stupid enough to mistake his proclamation for a joke.

Kaito himself also realized, in a detached sense, that “he would do it.”

*Once you kill someone, they can't come back. Getting a second chance like I did is an anomaly. But right now, I have to make sure they comply. I'm from another world, so I'm probably the only person who can act without being weighed down worrying about who will have what rights. Or who will have to make which concessions after we deal with the current situation...*

Right now, the world was like a sinking ship. But the grudges the various races held against one another were too deep for any one of them to be able to take the helm. To prevent them from being totally annihilated, an outsider needed to steer the ship to shore. And in order to do that, some people might need to be cast overboard. Kaito recognized that much, and he'd made his peace with it. Right now, killing a hundred to save a thousand, or perhaps killing a thousand to save ten times that, was the only option.

It was a stupid, arrogant choice to make. And it resembled the method *she* had once used.

“What would you do in this situation, Elisabeth?”

Kaito posed his question in a quiet, subdued voice. He received no reply. But that was to be expected.

At the moment, the ebony Torture Princess was bound to the Diablo pillar.

Kaito let out a masochistic laugh. However, a loud thumping noise rang out and interrupted his moment of sentimentality. Without turning around, Kaito snapped his fingers.

Someone else had *leaped atop the round table*, and the blades went flying toward them. The sound of the weapons whizzing through the air was followed by the sharp ringing of swords meeting.

From the corner of his vision, Kaito could make out sparks flying from where metal had clashed with metal. Each of his blades had been sent flying off in a different direction entirely. One of them had gone spinning toward a high priest



from the Church, who screamed. Right before tragedy could occur, however, Kaito transformed the blade back into azure petals.

The woman who'd repelled Kaito's attack had her vision obscured by the dancing flower petals, but she paid that no heed and charged instead.

As she rushed toward him, Kaito got a better look at her and narrowed his eyes. Her red hair looked like waves of billowing flame as it fluttered through the air.

"Yeah, I figured you'd attack," Kaito murmured.

The rebellious foe who'd jumped onto the table was a fox beastwoman clad in dignified, masculine clothing: the first imperial princess. Over the course of the meeting, she had not only shamelessly attacked the Church for their actions but had even declared war against all humanity. She thrust her sword forward as she ran, then released a superb strike.

For a moment, Kaito could vividly imagine the edge of her blade being driven into his chest.

Once again, the ringing sound of swords meeting echoed throughout the room.

"Yeesh, that was close. You've got a hell of a sword arm."

Using Nameless, the jet-black long sword in his right hand, Kaito had blocked the first imperial princess's blow. As he did, he snapped the fingers on his left hand and summoned blades all around her position.

In response, the first imperial princess sprang off the table, spinning diagonally through the air with characteristic beastfolk flexibility. After narrowly weaving her way through the slashes, she landed unharmed, then twirled to swat away the blades that had pursued her.

An instrumental noise rang out, and azure flower petals cascaded down.

Amid the storm of blossoms, the first imperial princess spoke in a curt tone.

"Ha, what a joke. You can drop the forced compliments, human. You haven't called in a single one of your subordinates, and you're blatantly pulling your punches. Do you really think me so simple a vixen as to rejoice at your hollow

words?”

She thrust forward again. Kaito tilted his head back on instinct alone, losing a chunk of his faded-brown hair for his troubles.

“How dare you cut Master Kaito’s precious hair!”

Hina, Kaito’s automaton bride, dashed across the table, halberd in hand. However, Kaito called her off with a glance. Hina somehow managed to stop herself, although she cracked the table’s surface in the process.

*“Good heavens, what a restless bunch they are. I must say, though, cracking the table with one’s feet alone is quite impressive.”*

*“I agree that for a mere human, the boy never seems to know when to shut up. None of them respect the value of silence.”*

Off to the side, Vlad and the Kaiser continued observing, as though they were mere spectators at a show.

That was precisely why Kaito had frowned when he’d heard the first imperial princess’s rebuke.

“I mean...see for yourself. Even if I told them to help, only one of them ever actually does what I say.”

“Be that as it may. If you were fighting for real, my head would’ve been parted from my body long ago.”

“You’re giving me a lot of credit, aren’t you? You could just put away the sword, then.”

“Hmph. I fail to understand your intentions, but you don’t look eager to bare your fangs any time soon. So I thought I’d kill you while you rested on your laurels—that’s the plan anyway. What do you make of it?”

“Seems like a pretty reasonable strategy.”

“Wearing away at my patience appears to be a hobby of yours. Now I’m determined to kill you.”

“Okay, in all honesty, I feel like you could tone down the aggression a little.”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who came in and seized control by



force! What a thoroughly infuriating human you are!”

The first imperial princess laughed as she swung her sword again. Over the course of their conversation, the two of them had exchanged several blows.

Everyone else present still had blades pressed against their noses, and they were all watching the exchange, flabbergasted.

It was a completely understandable reaction, and Kaito nodded. As he did, he deployed a set of blades in a fan formation, then shot them at the first imperial princess. She slashed each and every one of them away. As azure flower petals rained down on them, the two of them continued pacing atop the round table.

They looked almost like a pair of dancers, caught up in the mood of a festival.

*Right now, this princess is probably the only one who'd go against me head-on, huh.*

Kaito's thoughts raced as he and his foe restlessly circled each other and traded places.

He began working through his shock, all the while intentionally angling himself so that it would be difficult for the other beastfolk to aid the first imperial princess once they'd come to their senses. He hadn't expected anyone to respond to him with anything except rejection or surrender. And the fact that they'd been able to have a conversation midbattle made the situation all the stranger.

After gauging the onlookers' reactions, though, Kaito realized his current exchange was critical.

*Based on their expressions now and what they said a minute ago, my guess is that the second imperial princess of the beastfolk, Vyade Ula Forstlast, and the representative from the Church's saints, La Christoph, think of me as a way to avoid interracial conflict and are leaning toward obeying my decree... As for the demi-humans, they're fence-sitting like always.*

The young human king no longer seemed to possess the willpower to resist much of anything. Thanks to the Church's meddling, the aristocrats who would normally serve as his advisers had been excluded from the meeting. That meant if Kaito pressed him, he'd undoubtedly cave.

All he had to do was convince the first imperial princess, and the situation would rapidly tilt in his favor. Bearing that in mind, Kaito spoke again.

“Tell me, do you honestly believe you’ll be able to go up against humanity and wipe out all of Diablo’s underlings at the same time? No, never mind, you definitely do. And you’re strong enough to be able to say it confidently, too.”

“Self-absorbed, aren’t we? Small wonder your subordinates have such little trust in you.”

“All right, let me give you a warning, then. You’re looking at this *way* too optimistically.”

*Clang.*

Nameless and the first imperial princess’s blade met each other again a hair away from Kaito’s right cheek.

After retreating a step, Kaito snapped his fingers and sent a blade flying toward her wrist. She drew a knife from behind her back with her free hand and batted it away. Kaito nodded. He’d expected her to block it.

“The curtain has only just risen on the end-time. The underlings won’t stop—they’ll just keep coming and coming, with more of them spawning each wave. In order to prevent the apocalypse, you’ll need to defeat them all, then topple the God and Diablo pillars. If the three races mobilized as one, you still wouldn’t have the manpower to pull it off.”

“...Go on.”

“Even with the demi-humans on your side, choosing to fight while turning your back on a hostile race is a terrible move. The risks outweigh the rewards. But you already know that, right? You certainly don’t look stupid enough *not* to have realized that by now.”

“I understand full well how harsh an ordeal it will be. But now is our only chance. It has to be now.”

“What do you mean, ‘It has to be now’?”

After repelling another fierce blow from the first imperial princess, Kaito came to an abrupt stop. He had been pushed to the very edge of the round table.

There was nowhere left behind him to stand.

A bear beastman seized the opportunity to aim his bow at Kaito's back. But Kaito just sent a blade to silently sever its bowstring. The beastfolk stared, aghast, at his now-useless weapon.

As Kaito traded places with the first imperial princess once more, the hem of his black outfit waved in the air as though nothing had happened.

The two of them faced the center of the table as they resumed their dance. The first imperial princess murmured in a melodic voice:

“Let's think about what will happen after we get through this crisis. Even now, the beastfolk and demi-humans combined can't compare with humanity's numbers. If we assume the underlings will attack all three races in kind, then after Diablo's threat has passed, when we take the respective damages into account, the gap in power between humanity and the rest of ours will likely only grow. Even though they were the ones who brought this calamity upon us in the first place. Territory, population, resources... If we ever want to overtake them, then it has to be now, while their saints are preoccupied with defeating the underlings and the mistrust toward the Church has caused them internal strife. If we pass up this final opportunity, then things will undoubtedly come to a head once more. After all, humanity has shown they cannot be trusted.”

“Ah, I get it. You're worried that someday, humanity will decide to exclude the other two races.”

Kaito nodded. The first imperial princess threw concealed knives at him and leveled countless thrusts his way, all the while confirming his assessment.

“They will. It may not happen for decades, or even centuries, but what kind of ruler would I be if I didn't consider the future of my people? Humanity is fundamentally xenophobic, and they consider themselves special, whether they realize it or not. They will bring about another tragedy, mark my words.”

Kaito repelled her sword again and again. Clear, ringing noises filled the air, and he came to realize a certain fact.

The first imperial princess hadn't been appointed by mistake. The Three Kings of the Forest, the ones who'd appointed the imperial family, had known exactly



what they were doing. Unlike the second imperial princess, Vyade the Wise Wolf, she was belligerent, but she, too, had the makings of a ruler. In order for the beastfolk to survive, they needed both moderates and extremists.

The only problem was that if they followed her lead and acted against humanity while they could, then the world would be destroyed.

*Is she just misjudging her own strength? No...if anything, it's that her imagination is lacking.*

Realizing that, Kaito frowned. After all, the beastfolk had never seen what Diablo and the demons were capable of. Some of their people had been massacred by paladins who'd consumed demon meat, but they'd managed to avoid ever being attacked by a full-fledged demon. And the hellscapes that demons created were beyond what any normal person could imagine. As a result, the first imperial princess had no way of knowing the horrors that awaited them. However, Kaito couldn't bring himself to blame her for her ignorance. For one thing, not even the Church, the people who'd caused their predicament, fully grasped the true situation. It was nigh impossible for the living to comprehend just what it meant for the world to be approaching its demise. But right now, Kaito needed to impress that impossibility on everyone present.

Every living being needed to know. For their own sakes.

*Nobody's gonna come save us.*

He couldn't leave them with any leeway to consider what would come afterward.

"If things go on like this, we'll all die."

Kaito's declaration was simple and to the point. The first imperial princess opened her mouth, then closed it again. The sharp certainty of his words must have sparked something in her. Her sword was pressing against his Nameless, and she put her strength into it, then leaped backward. After putting some distance between herself and Kaito, she shot another piercing gaze his way.

Kaito looked straight back into her golden eyes. He opened his mouth once more.

But the moment he did, *it* came without warning.

“...!”

It came with a *thump*.

Kaito’s heart pounded violently, and he vomited up a large amount of blood.



The pure-white round table was painted a vivid shade of red. A stir spread through the present dignitaries. However, nobody made to stand up. The sole person who was quick to react was Hina.

“Master Kaito!”

When she dashed across the table this time, she didn’t stop. The hem of her maid outfit fluttered as she rushed to Kaito’s side. She knelt in the pool of blood without hesitation.

“...Hi...na...”

“My dear Master Kaito, are you all right? Oh, how it pains my heart to see you so. If only I could take your place... Here, try to calm your breathing.”

Hina’s clothes and feet were stained wet and red. But she rubbed Kaito’s back, paying that fact little heed.

The dignitaries remained in their seats. The rebel was coughing up blood. Now was their chance, yet nobody moved. To the contrary, their faces were all frozen. Even the people with no magical training were stiffening up.

As he looked out over them, Kaito’s thoughts took a self-deprecating turn.

*Am I...really that abnormal?*

At the same time, though, he understood. His mana was both causing the very air to shake ominously and also exploding in volume. Anyone watching his bizarre development would find it warped.

*“Hmm. I take it the second bugle has blown, then?”*

*“The garbage has been released, like a swarm of locusts.”*

An unpleasant grin spread across Vlad’s face as he propped his chin up with

his finger. The Kaiser's tone was curt and displeased.

La Christoph was facing straight ahead, and he spoke with a calmness rarely found in saints.

"Is it here?"

"Yeah. It is."

The question was concise, and Kaito replied in kind.

He pressed his cheek softly against Hina's and rose to his feet. The first imperial princess cocked her head in confusion. Before her eyes, Kaito thrust out his hand. Then he ran mana through the pool of blood that had accumulated in the table's depression.

"*La* (reflect)."

With a *whoosh*, the crimson surface began glowing. Light knit together in the air, forming an image. Even using one of the Church's communication devices, projecting a clear picture of events that were taking place far away was difficult. As he was now, though, Kaito could do it like it was second nature.

The image expanded out over the round table, revealing what was happening at the World's End in real time.

Several people let out cries of terror.

The sky in the image was stained jet-black.

Normally, the sky at the World's End was empty, with nothing there but oily, rainbow-colored lights drifting amid a smooth, gray backdrop. Now, though, it was sullied by an endless night. And to make things even more unbelievable, the blackness was growing endlessly blacker. Its true identity was a massive swarm of freshly released underlings.

The tiny shadows had gathered together and, in doing so, had dyed the sky black. It was like looking at ruin incarnate.

The throng was communicating a single malevolent will.

**The world shall end.**

**For that is what ■ decided.**



“The second wave.”

Upon hearing Kaito’s declaration, the first imperial princess gazed at the image in wonderment, wordlessly glaring at the countless figures. Then suddenly, she closed her eyes. Her voice sounded parched, yet it came across clear and crisp.

“You say there will be even more?”

“The third wave will come tomorrow at sunset, and the fourth wave should be released the day after, at around noon.”

Kaito’s reply was dispassionate. Because he’d received Elisabeth’s heart, he was connected to her and Diablo’s pillar as a result. Thanks to that, he had a clear grasp on how the doomsday needle was moving.

He spoke with complete confidence, something that lent additional persuasion to an already powerful proclamation.

The first imperial princess nodded, then clicked her tongue again. Kaito could easily tell what was going through her mind.

*The beastfolk excel at single combat, I bet. They don’t have any saints at their disposal, and they’re not great at magic. There’s no way they can show off their true strength against that insane number of underlings.*

From the beastfolk’s perspective, humanity had ceased to be their friendly neighbors and were now nothing more than a fearsome threat. But without their help, it was unlikely they’d be able to wipe out all the underlings.

At the same time, Kaito saw something in the first imperial princess’s expression.

*Good. She realizes it, too.*

Kaito had already known.

Once the second wave hit, *even humanity’s help wouldn’t be enough to mount a complete defense.*

After all, the whole reason the Church had entrusted the subjugation of the fourteen demons to the Torture Princess, a peerless sinner, was because they themselves lacked the power to do so. Their supply of saints was limited, and

even then, not only did the saints lack mobility, but they also suffered considerable exhaustion from each shot they fired.

Furthermore, thanks to the repeated demon battles and the hasty actions of the reconstruction sect, the Church had lost many of their best paladins. In short, the tools they could fight Diablo with were extremely lacking.

At the end of the day, whether the beastfolk chose to fight against humanity or alongside them, the result would be the same.

Every living creature would die.

However, even so, there remained one way to fight back against the end.

For *a monster existed* in this world.

The first imperial princess cast a stern gaze toward Kaito. As she appraised him with her eyes, she asked him a question.

“...Can you kill them?”

“Damn right I can.”

Kaito wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth as he gave his answer. There was one thing that he was confident of.

*The Torture Princess isn't around for humanity to rely on anymore. Which means...*

At the moment, there existed no one more suited to subjugate demons than Kaito Sena.

The truth was, his mana was increasing violently because of the pain the underlings were causing. That perverse fact, combined with his immortal body, meant wiping out the underlings was no mere pipe dream.

The first imperial princess took stock of the ominous trembling in the air. Then she clicked her tongue a third time.

“Tch.”

*Clink.*

After that she mixed in a sharper noise. Of all things, she'd sheathed her sword.

Her subordinates let out agitated cries. Her back turned to them, she proudly introduced herself.

“My name is Valisisa Ula Forstlast.”

Kaito nodded. In that moment, by him learning her name—one other than *the first imperial princess*, that is—she’d become more familiar to him. Valisisa accompanied her self-introduction with a graceful bow.

“I’ll admit I acted somewhat hastily. The world after this will be ours, but for now, it seems we must leave it in your hands. We beastfolk value results. Show us who you are, Mad King.”

The assembled congregation gasped. Somebody tried to raise an objection, but Vyade Ula Forstlast rose from her seat and silently cut them off. Following her sister’s lead, she, too, gave a courteous bow.

Upon seeing that, the first imperial prince of the beastfolk twitched the tip of his panther nose. He hurriedly corrected his posture.

At that very moment, a mere human had earned the backing of both Valisisa Ula Forstlast, the first imperial princess, and Vyade Ula Forstlast, the second imperial princess.

Given the first imperial princess’s statement, it was only natural that the beastfolk came under Kaito’s command. The demi-humans nodded and gave their assent. In contrast to her obedient words, though, Valisisa’s next remark was tinged with naked bloodlust.

“However, if you fail, I will personally take your head.”

“Oh yeah. If that happens, *then I don’t deserve to live*. No complaints here.”

When Kaito returned her threat, there was no fervor in his voice. He meant every word he’d said.

The two of them stared at each other a moment longer. Valisisa took a few steps forward. Then she wordlessly drew her weapon. Kaito naturally followed her lead and brandished Nameless in kind.

A loud, sharp ringing sound filled the air as they struck their swords against each other.



In place of a handshake, the Mad King and the first imperial princess of the beastfolk had crossed their blades.

And on that note, with the boy from another world at its center—  
—the unified three-race defensive front began to move.

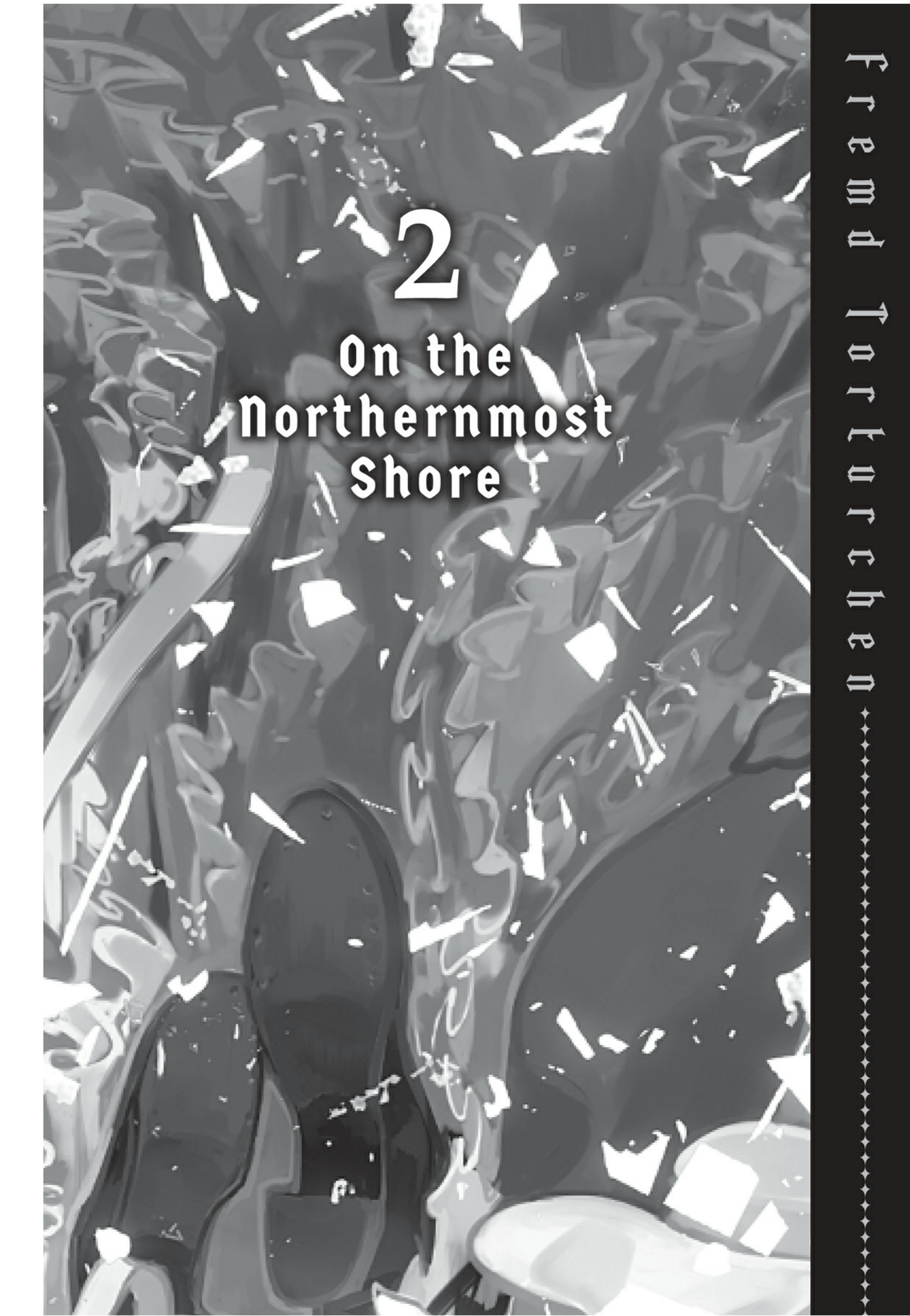


# Ualisisa Ula Forstlast

The beastwoman selected by the Forest King to serve as the first imperial princess. While she tends to be belligerent, she is gifted both in wisdom and military prowess and was born with the capacity to be an excellent dynast. And while her speech may be coarse at times, she's skilled at determining the true strength of others.



# Ualisisa Ula Forstlast



2

On the  
Northernmost  
Shore

Fremd Torkehrer



## 2

### On the Northernmost Shore

Off in the distance, crows were cawing.

Their voices, tinged with melancholy, stirred up a certain nostalgia.

The owners of these voices circled about the gray sky with their black wings spread wide. In truth, they weren't actually crows. They weren't even birds at all. Their cries, beaks, and black wings did resemble those of crows, but the creatures turning through the sky did not have craniums. Their soft brain matter was fully exposed, some of it having even broken down. And their bodies were infested with flies. By all rights, they should have been dead. Yet the horrific figures didn't even seem to be in pain.

Their very existences had clearly diverged from the evolutionary tree of life. Though, all things considered, that made perfect sense.

After all, they were Diablo's underlings.

*Croak, cRoak, crOak, croAk, croak.*

Only their voices were melancholy. The underlings themselves, each of their large bodies about the size of a small pig, were swirling calmly.

Then they gently swooped down toward the chilly beach.

An underling grazed the surface of a leather tent, one of the many that had been systematically set up just beyond the waves' reach. Together, the tents formed an impressive encampment. It was filled with flags from all three races, flapping in the sea breeze.

A coat of arms adorned with a white lily. A coat of arms featuring plants and beasts. A coat of arms sporting a dark-red lizard. The three flags lined up together served as proof that the three races' armies were working as one.

The cream of the crop had been chosen from within those armies, and they

were the ones stationed on the coastline serving as the first line of defense.

The battle-hardened veterans present had been given the coordinates, but not even they could comprehend the route the underlings had taken from the World's End. However, the vast majority of the fiends had been aiming for this nameless northern beach.

Technically, the deserted land wasn't just any old beach. It was the northernmost tip of the human territories, wedged between the beastfolk and demi-human lands. Back when formal boundary lines were first being drawn up, the area was discovered to be a piece of private property that existed in the buffer zone between the two races' domains. That was where the beach's inane, tangled history began.

An investigation found that a human doctor had gotten lost and mistakenly stumbled upon a beastfolk town that no longer existed today. After they cured an epidemic, the town's mayor at the time bestowed the beach on them as thanks. Following that, though, disputes around tradition and obligations grew fierce and messy. There remained some lingering resentment in the wake of the peace treaty, so it was finally decided the land would be left as is.

As far as rights to the ocean surrounding it went, that was a whole other headache. So out of consideration for the other two races, the humans more or less left the ocean abandoned.

From the naked beach, the underlings could easily spread out to invade the demi-human and beastfolk lands, and they could surge south toward the human territories as well. The defensive front's goal was to stop the underlings before it got to that point.

They had already successfully driven back the second and third waves.

The underlings left over from those two waves were soaring in at regular intervals, and the soldiers were currently working to shoot them down. However, they'd just finished taking down a large flock, so they were in a temporary cease-fire. The soldiers manning the coastline were keeping a watchful eye on the survivors soaring overhead. Because the battle had died down, people were hurriedly trying to move the wounded.

The wounded were being carried to medical tents based on the severity of

their injuries. And within the tents, there were strange people mixed in with the others. A girl so young that she hardly looked suited for the battlefield had been tossed down respectfully yet forcefully onto one of the beds.

At first glance, she seemed uninjured. However, she was repeatedly coughing up frothy blood. She was swaddled in scarlet cloth, and her legs were bound with countless metal bands. The unrefined restraints were designed to stop her from squirming and opening up the laceration that ran all the way from her thighs to her ankles. White, humanlike teeth were neatly lined up on the inside of the slit. It was grotesque in a way that defied common sense. Anyone who looked like that could only be a demon's contractor or someone with a strong link to God.

The girl was the latter—one of the Church's saints.

She had connected to God too much, and the burden had caused her to hit her limit. And she wasn't the only one. Several other saints had already been put to sleep in the first-aid station. They'd been flailing about like fish and been administered a powerful, dangerous anesthetic as a result. Bit by bit, the fighters the army had who were effective against the underlings had been whittled away. But the crow cries still hadn't completely died down yet.

This desperate situation was well befitting of the end-time.

"...They're still coming?"

One of the soldiers murmured in a voice thick with tension and fatigue. Part of the sky had been forcefully stained black, as though a storm had arisen. The horrible creatures kept appearing, like flies drawn to carrion.

The underlings were blotting out the horizon.

Compared with the second and third waves, their numbers were negligible. But for an army exhausted by nonstop battles, it was more than enough to induce despair. The soldiers looked up at the flock with heavy eyes.

Suddenly, a powerful noise echoed through the air to encourage them.

The moist sand sank. The saints lined up along the water's edge had each released the shackles from their bodies.

Standing in their center was La Christoph. He had solemnly spread his arms wide, as though to part his own long, black hair.

He was a tall man, and his shoulders were broad. However, one part of the physique he had been blessed with was horribly transfigured. His chest area and the white robe over it were both incised. His flesh had been pared away, and his rib cage lay bare. Yet no blood spilled forth. The heart and lungs his ribs were supposed to be protecting were completely gone.

In their place, a huge number of white, feathered creatures were packed within him.

La Christoph, the Modest Birdkeeper, spoke in a strangely smooth voice.

“We gather and wait.”

*“We gather and wait.”*

His dignified voice was met with a metallic chorus. The saints had begun cladding themselves in light.

The soldiers unconsciously straightened their postures. Even now that God had become their enemy, seeing the saints lined up evoked a sense of nobility and sacredness. However, their figures were repulsive, even unsettling.

After all, most of the saints’ bodies had been transfigured in some capacity.

Their forms were myriad—there were people with their eyes transformed into rainbow spheres, people with tattoos winding across their skin, and people with fish swimming around in their transparent abdomens. And even among those without any external abnormalities, some of them were laughing without end, others were reciting scripture with their mouths closed, and yet others were in similar states as La Mules had been. But while it was unclear how they were maintaining a joint sense of purpose, all of them were obeying La Christoph’s orders.

Following his lead, they shut their mouths tight. It was a strange sight to behold, one that resembled some kind of ceremony.

The beach was overtaken by a solemn silence. However, that silence was irreverently broken by the underlings’ shrill cries.



The moment it happened, La Christoph opened his eyes as wide as possible and shouted in a voice like thunder.

“The hammer falls on thee!”

*“Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAAA!”*

A flock of skylarks. A school of fish. Rainbow light. Drops of blood.

They all swelled up in tune with the eerie chorus, then shot toward the enemy.

Countless holes opened in the underlings’ stomachs, their brain tissue was consumed, and their heads went flying clean off. They immediately began falling out of the sky. Several evaporated into a heat haze, then were blown away and scattered by the sea breeze.

Numerous underlings spiraled down and were swallowed up by the waves. At first glance, it looked like victory had been secured. Not letting his guard down, though, a wolf beastman looked through a telescope, then narrowed his eyes.

The beastman in question was Lute, the commanding officer of the first squad of Vyade Ula Forstlast’s private army.

Setting aside the telescope, he swung his arm downward.

“Location two, gray. Location six, black. All others, within expectations. Over!”

“Repeat, location two gray, location six black! At the ready!”

This concise command indicated how the foes who had evaded the saints’ shots were clustering together.

After configuring their positions to account for the quantity of incoming enemies, the beastfolk raised their shields overhead. They were standing in front of the saints and serving as a living wall. Human soldiers slipped beneath them and began nocking their consecrated arrows.

One of them shouted, angrily laying their frustration bare.

“The damn monsters... They just keep on coming!”

Consecrated or not, conventional weaponry had little effect on the underlings. The soldiers had to endure their fear and wait until their foes were

close enough before launching their arrows. Right before the enemy made contact, though, disaster struck in the saints' line.



One frightfully thin woman keeled over. With a pitifully weak noise, she collapsed into the sand. Glowing, albino rat snakes were slithering through her dark hair.

La Christoph gestured with his chin, not showing a shred of alarm. A group of scarlet-clad attendants rushed over to the woman's side. After covering her head with a helmet, they forcibly fixed the helmet in place with screws and swaddled her whole body in scarlet cloth. Then the attendants roughly yet reverently carried her away from the front lines.

A moment later, another saint collapsed. The soldiers gasped. Their military strength was slowly but surely chipping away. The experienced members among their ranks could see the army as a whole was reaching its limit.

Despite that, though, they couldn't abandon the front. It was far too early to give up.

And in a very real sense, it was far too late.

To quell their fears, the beastfolk and humans joined together in a valiant war cry.

""""YAHHHHHHHHHH!""""

*Croak, cRoak, crOak, croAk, croaaaaaaK.*

With an ominous caw, the underlings descended.

Then their cries were drowned out by a comical thumping noise.

"...Huh?"

Something splattered against the beastfolk's shields. They frantically looked to see what it was. Their shields were stained crimson. The soldiers' eyes went wide, and they cast their gazes back overhead. Blood was raining down from the sky.

The underlings had all gone stiff. It should have been impossible, but it looked like they'd stopped completely.

Each and every one of them had been impaled with *ten black blades apiece*.

"...Huh?"



“Hurrah!”

Shock and joy were just two of the many emotions in the soldiers’ cries.

The next moment, the oddly frozen scene crumbled all at once.

The blades all faded away into azure petals, then traced magnificent, ephemeral paths through the air. The underlings fell, too, leaving trails of blood in their wake. These displays of crimson and azure joined together, then were swallowed up by the gray sea in kind.

It made for a beautifully merciless spectacle. The soldiers gazed upon it in awe.

Then they were met from behind with a voice whose casualness was completely unfit for the circumstances.

“Hey, sorry I’m late.”

The voice’s owner was no enemy. The soldiers knew that. Their ally who’d temporarily left the front lines after the third wave had been crushed had returned—that was all. Yet even knowing that, they couldn’t conceal their trepidation as they turned around to face him. The stares of everyone present gathered on the voice’s owner.

There stood a thin boy languidly waving his arm.

“Is everyone okay? Ooh, you definitely don’t look okay.”

“...Sir Kaito Sena.”

Someone murmured his name, their voice thick with fear. The boy nodded. His demeanor was so casual, it made the reaction seem ridiculous. He was wearing a black military uniform, so his outfit could certainly be considered becoming of the treatment he was receiving. But between his short stature, the seedy look in his eyes, and his childish features, there were likely few who could recognize him as the Mad King from his looks alone. And his appearance definitely wouldn’t have led anyone to imagine he was the one who’d taken down the underlings just then. But that wasn’t even all that he’d done.

The boy had carried out the slaughter of the second and third waves near single-handedly.

In other words, the real monster wasn't the underlings.

*It was that human.*



“You know, I think it’s kinda rude that people keep looking at me like I’m some sorta monster.”

“If you’re not a monster, then who is? Hell, even trolls are more human than you are.”

Upon hearing Kaito’s complaint, Valisisa Ula Forstlast, the first imperial princess of the beastfolk, scoffed.

Sullen, Kaito offered no rebuttal. He continued walking in silence.

Even the soldiers who weren’t keeping an eye out for survivors were staying busy—preparing and serving food to warm their bodies up from the chilly, salty wind, replacing their weapons, maintaining their equipment, and treating their own minor scratches and wounds. The air was thick with the smells of the sea, blood, sweat, metal, fur, and leather all blended together.

Kaito wove his way between the soldiers and made his way toward the first imperial princess’s tent. After dealing with the underlings, he was originally supposed to head for the first-aid station so he could take stock of the wounded. On his way, though, he’d been called over by Valisisa and was currently following her bouncy red tail.

It paired poorly with her gallant, masculine uniform, but her tail really was cute.

Kaito chose to keep that impression to himself, knowing that sharing it could get him killed, and asked Valisisa a question.

“So what’s the situation like?”

“You can see for yourself how bad things are. That pack of saints is even more useless than I expected... And because of them, all the regular soldiers are having to pick up more slack than they can handle. Those saints are powerful as fixed batteries, true, but their durability leaves a lot to be desired. They aren’t suited for constant battles like this. They seemed threatening before, but the

humans' stinginess in deploying them in actual combat is coming home to roost. The fact that the humans never took proper readings on their durability is aggravating."

"Those are people you're talking about, you know. You shouldn't refer to them like they're weapons."

"Ha, calling those saints 'people' is like a bad joke. So much so that it's funny. And even if they were, right now, everyone and their mother are nothing more than pawns. Although you, Mad King, might be the exception. That carefree nature of yours, the fact that you possess power surpassing any other's... It's like you were born to infuriate me. Do you *enjoy* annoying me, by any chance?"

"I'm feeling a little hated right now."

"Not at all. Relax. This is far preferable to incompetence. Feel free to be as useful as you please. Usefulness begets love, after all. Once you've averted the end of days, if you wish to submit yourself before the beastfolk, I would even offer you my hand in marriage."

"Sorry, but I already have a lovely wife."

"Oh, thank goodness. Just thinking about sharing a bed with the likes of a human makes my skin crawl."

"Then don't offer."

Kaito shrugged, half-exasperatedly. Valisisa laughed scornfully.

She seemed to enjoy talking, and she was doing quite a bit of it. But upon seeing them conversing, the beastfolk passing by simply looked in astonishment. Although he'd only known her a short while, Kaito could tell Valisisa's behavior was the reason they were staring. It appeared her pool of conversational partners was limited. If she deemed someone unnecessary, they wouldn't even enter her field of vision. For better or for worse, she seemed to have a straightforward way of viewing the world. Yet when she was dealing with Kaito, she spoke freely. The soldiers' surprise made perfect sense.

*Has she taken a liking to me, maybe? Or does she just not think I'm worthy of her concern? It could easily be both... Man, I just can't get a read on her.*

As he turned that thought over in his mind, Kaito arrived at a tent whose entrance was flanked on both sides by doorkeepers.

When he went inside, he left the moist, chilly air behind him and was greeted instead by the warmth of a simple stove. The craftsmanship of the beastfolk's portable dwellings never failed to impress. While the imperial princess's tent was likely the only one of its kind, it had all the furniture necessary to conduct official business, and the floor was even covered with a bulky rug.

Valisisa sat down hard in her large, stately chair. She swished her tail from side to side as she rested one elbow on her desk. Then she began tapping away at the large map spread out across it.

"So? What were the results of your patrol?"

"The damage was pretty nasty all over... But when you consider how slow we were to get started, the evacuation efforts are coming along decently. And we were able to hit the underlings' main landing sites fairly hard. They don't have any sort of command structure, so their behavior itself is relatively predictable. As long as we can figure out the best ways to attack them and where they're gonna land, all we have to do is head to the corresponding points and drive them back as many times as we can."

As he was laying out his explanation, Kaito snapped his fingers and crafted a chair for himself out of black darkness and azure flower petals. It was the exact same piece as the luxurious article Vlad had once created.

Kaito crossed his legs as he sat atop its leather seat, across from Valisisa. Then unhesitatingly, he reached his arm out to the map and touched the large, yellow expanse that indicated the desert.

"As for the demi-human pureblood sector, its construction is just as peculiar as I heard. The walls around the first ward are flawless, but as the ward numbers go up, the defensive structures get shittier. I guess the conditions really are different based on purity of the residents' blood... But because of this layout, the brunt of the losses came from the purebloods. They keep the gates to the other wards sealed off, so they didn't have anywhere to escape to. I don't even want to think about the attack the third ward got hit by... They were literally getting tortured to death."



“Ha, I warned them to improve conditions every chance I got, but they never listened. The pureblood sector’s defenses are designed to protect against overland invaders and mixed-blood uprisings. They didn’t even consider that attacks might come from above. Their fate was only natural for ones with a weakness so pronounced... Come now, don’t give me that face. I would have disparaged them the exact same way if it was my race we were talking about. If you get hung up on every little thing, we’ll be here all day. Get over it. Now, it’s the duty of the living to prevent more victims from arising. Did they finish reorganizing their defenses?”

“By some miracle, yeah. We pinned down the source of the underlings here at the beach, so once we shot down the ones that were approaching via alternate routes, things settled down for a while. We figured out bombarding them from the second-ward bulwarks was the best way to take care of them. Right now, the soldiers gathered there are using the demi-humans’ metalwork cannons to keep up the assault. The civilians are split up among the various sectors and are under tight management. Once we opened up the gates, it was easy to come up with efficient evacuation routes and set up focused escorts. They should be able to hold through the day, even without my help.”

Valisisa nodded coolly. It seemed all had fallen within her expectations.

She shook her soft tail as she continued her line of questioning.

“What of humanity’s Capital?”

“I only just heard back from them, but it sounds like they’re doing comparatively well. The remaining paladins and the mages have been working together successfully. They don’t have much that’s effective against the underlings besides their divine beasts, but those summoned beasts are no joke. That said, we can’t make out the damage they’ve taken in the countryside. They’ve allowed the lords to decline to dispatch soldiers to the Capital and just focus on protecting their own territories instead. And they’ve deployed people who can draw up barriers and teleportation circles to all the major cities so they can aid in the defense and evacuation efforts.”

“And my beloved homeland?”

“Right, sorry I had to put you in charge of the Northernmost Shore instead of

your own country. Just like I promised, you don't have anything to worry about. All of Vyade's squadrons save for the first are manning the defenses around the World Tree, and I gave them a powerful— Hmm?"

Then without warning, Kaito went silent and started rummaging through his pocket. He pulled out a glass orb filled with red liquid. It wasn't the jewel he'd been carrying around that housed the replica of Vlad's soul. Valisisa narrowed her eyes in puzzlement.

Kaito snapped his fingers. Azure petals began dancing within the orb. The red liquid took on a radiant glow, and a person's figure appeared on its surface. The plain, bespectacled court lady gave a deep nod.

*"Sir Kaito, do you have a moment to spare?"*

*"Yeah, you're fine. What's up?"*

*"I believe you requested to be promptly informed if she woke up, so... She has awakened."*

The court lady's voice was low, as though she were afraid of something.

One of Kaito's eyebrows sprang up. A moment later, though, his expression went calm again, and he nodded.

*"Got it. Thanks for the heads-up."*

*"With all due respect, the reconstruction sect will raise a fuss once they find out. You may want to hurry."*

*"Believe me, I know. Good work out there."*

After thanking her, Kaito extinguished the light. She was still bowing as her figure faded from view.

The woman had been one of the communications personnel working for the king. At present, humanity hadn't formally given Kaito their backing. In spite of that, though, many humans, the court lady among them, carried out Kaito's orders without running them by their superiors, despite the fact that he was officially powerless. The chain of command was a complete mess.

In a sense, humanity had found themselves in quite the odd situation.

*You can hardly blame them, though. Right now, people are being forced to watch one another get torn to shreds and cast aside like garbage.*

Given the general chaos, it made sense for them to want to follow the strongest guy around. And all the more so with that person having declared himself an ally to everyone alive. But he couldn't count on their blind faith lasting forever.

Once things settled down, many of them would start regretting their actions or else be swayed by some new authority figure and begin reproaching Kaito. But he was fine with that.

*I don't need unshakable motives or faith from them; I only need their cooperation.*

As long as he could *do what he needed to do, that was enough.*

Kaito casually slipped the orb back into his pocket. Valisisa puffed her tail up with displeasure.

"Hold it. You would bring out that strange device all of a sudden, then put it away without another word? What is it? Compared with the Church's communication devices, its make is unreasonably simple, no?"

"What, this? Okay, so first, I craft a glass orb out of mana, right? Then I put my blood into it. It's basically just one big ball of my mana. I can use it as an intermediary for all sorts of different spells."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Kaito nodded frankly. He then hurriedly wiped at the trail of blood quickly trickling from the corner of his mouth.

Valisisa heaved a long, deep sigh and shook her head in exasperation.

"You're really starting to deviate from how magic works in this world, you know."

"I mean, you're not wrong. Most of my mana comes from the pain I get from my connection to Diablo's pillar, after all. Diablo's like an observer from a high plane; it's not like me or you. But the basic principles behind this are pretty

similar to the ones behind that, aren't they?"

Kaito gestured with his chin toward Valisisa's finger. Wrapped around it was an extravagant ring composed of a large, glittering crystal set in a loop of silver ivy. Pink flower buds rested within the crystal.

It was a rare beauty, like spring itself had been captured in ice.

Valisisa wasn't wearing any other ornamentation on her body. She didn't seem the type to enjoy dressing up.

However, Kaito could sense a great deal of mana coming from within the ring. It was clearly a powerful magic device, and not a mere piece of decoration. The beastfolk were lacking in magical talent, so it was a surprising article to see one of them wearing.

Valisisa snorted as she stroked the ring.

"We've been pouring mana into this little by little for generations, ever since the Three Kings of the Forest bestowed it upon one of the members of the first imperial family. Disrespectful, don't you think, equating it to that thing you made on a whim?"

"Oh, sorry. Well, now that I've gone and ruined the mood, I guess it's as good a time as any... The pillar is getting ready to release the fourth wave, so things should be quiet for a little while. Sorry I'm so busy, but would you mind if I teleported out for a bit?"

"You being busy is only natural. The thought of you having free time is almost comical. You have my leave. Go."

"I owe you one."

"But be certain you return before the fourth wave hits. Without you, this shore will be annihilated. And when the foundation of a pile of stones is shattered, the result is self-evident—everything falls to ruin."

Upon hearing her weighty words, Kaito nodded. He promised her he'd be back. Then, after asking her permission again, he placed his orb on the floor. The blood within slowly began oozing out of the glass.

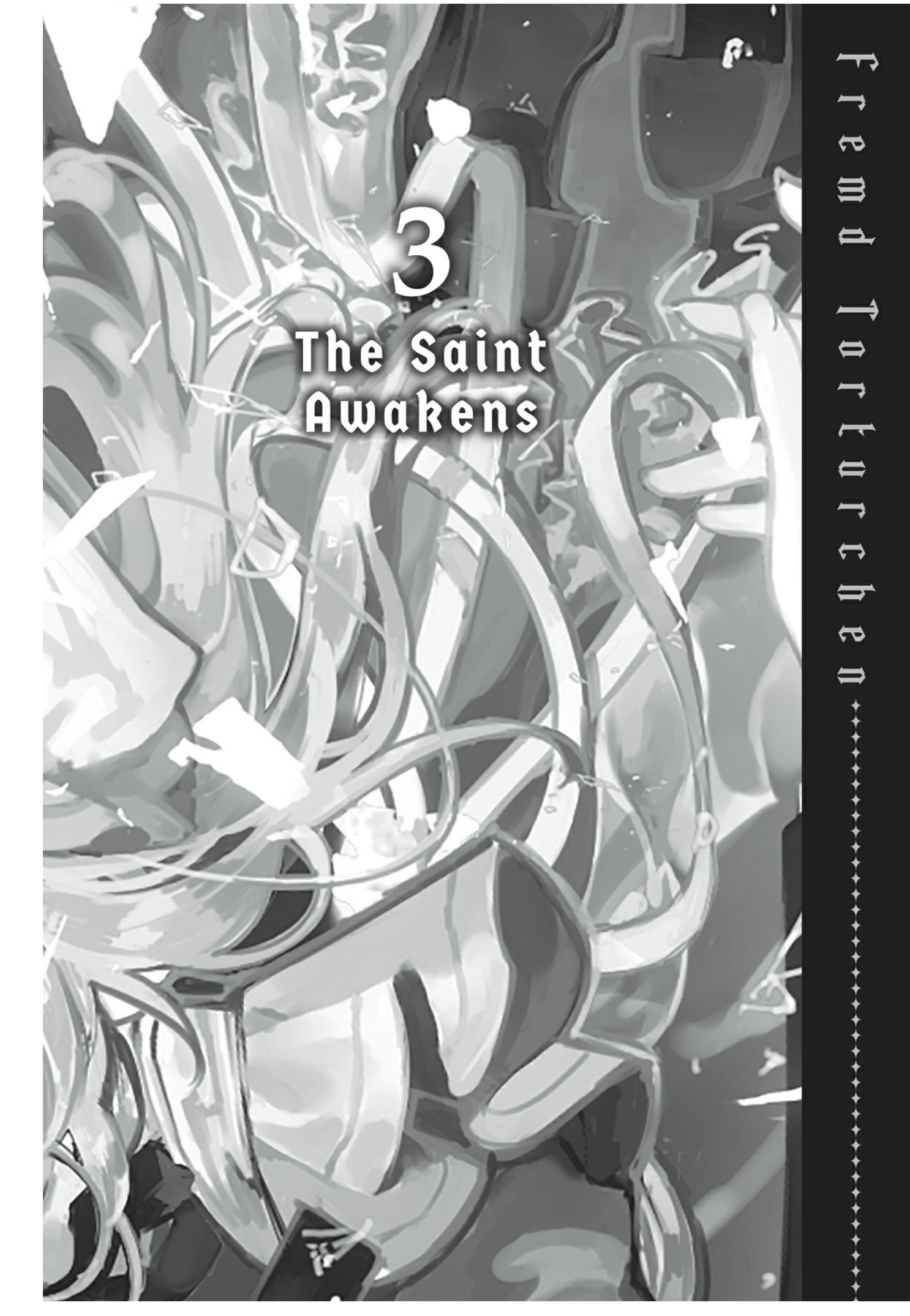
It then started to inscribe a pattern atop the rug, as though it were alive.



Azure flower petals swirled up gently within the tent, dancing splendidly through the air as they spread. They then melted together and hardened, forming cylindrical walls around Kaito. On the other side, Valisisa spoke detachedly:

“Farewell, then. And give my regards to the Saint.”

And with that, Kaito abruptly lost consciousness.



3

The Saint  
Awakens

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

# 3

## The Saint Awakens

*It's a weird thing, being powerful.*

That was what Kaito Sena thought.

All someone had to do was possess incredible power, and others would instinctively show them deference, fear, and respect. Even if the end of the world hadn't been nigh, the number of people following that person would probably be above zero. They would be like demon worshippers, true, but demon worshippers had existed for countless ages, after all.

At the moment, Kaito was in constant pain. It felt as though his entrails were being toyed with by a windlass, his cranial nerves were being directly lit ablaze, and someone was carving up his bones. As long as he didn't throw in the towel, though, he could generate an endless supply of mana. It was a technique born from several combined influences: his experiences from his past life, his immortal body, his contract with the Kaiser, and the fact that he possessed the Torture Princess's heart.

As a result, not a single person in the world was his equal.

What word would even be fitting to describe such a peerless individual?

*Almighty? Omnipotent? Strongest? Unbeatable? Invincible? Hero? Messiah?*  
*...Mad King?*

*Regardless...*

*...None of that actually means anything.*

That was what Kaito Sena thought.

Power was supposed to carry inherent responsibility with it. A person's strength was fundamentally useless if they lacked a purpose—something to use that power for. It was little more than a parlor trick. Kaito understood that fact

implicitly—if he couldn't fulfill his promise, then all the power and accolades in the world wouldn't mean a thing. As a matter of fact...

*...It would piss me off if they did.*



Kaito slowly opened his eyes.

The azure wall before him cracked, then a moment later shattered like glass.

*...H-huh?*

He blinked a few times. He'd just been deep in thought about something; he was sure of it. But he couldn't for the life of him remember what it had been. He must have lost consciousness for a short bit.

Kaito heaved a deep sigh, then shook his head a little and covered his forehead with his hand.

"What, again? Fuck."

Activating the teleportation circle itself was easy. However, this situation had started happening more and more frequently.

The root of the problem lay in the fact that his pain disappeared during transit. Then it would all come back at once, causing his body to die of shock and have to automatically revive.

*I guess I should be glad the blood didn't get stuck in my trachea, at least. Getting it out before I choke to death and die a second time sounds like a giant hassle... Depending on how bad it got, I might even have to rip out my throat... And I'd really rather not... If someone saw me before I healed, they would definitely cause a scene.*

His thoughts barely coherent, Kaito spat out the blood that had accumulated in his mouth. The ground was dyed sticky and red. He didn't hesitate for a moment as he strode over the puddle of his own blood he himself had made.

As he walked, he reminded himself how long it had been since the pillars had gone up.

*It's only been two days... Or maybe I should say it's "already" been two days?*

He had to get everything done within the next five days.

If he didn't, everyone would die.

The people he loved, the people he hated, the people he didn't care about one way or the other—everyone. But panicking wouldn't accomplish anything. There was something important that Kaito was lacking in order to carry out his objective.

*There're just too many things that I don't know... I guess my only option's to keep doing what needs to get done.*

As he walked across the lush, high-quality moss, Kaito cast his gaze upward.

Looming in front of him was the colossal World Tree.

Even with the end approaching, the rich foliage blotting out the sky was as splendid as ever. The gigantic, aged tree was still releasing consecrated energy. Because of that, its surroundings were free of underlings.

Free of living underlings, that was. Their corpses littered the ground here and there.

The beastfolk lands had suffered damages in the war, but those damages only went as far as the round river, which originated from the pure waters in the earth's depths and surrounded the forest containing the World Tree.

Even now, the beastfolk were fighting alongside Kaito's special appointee to prevent the underlings from reaching the bedchamber of the Three Kings of the Forest. From time to time, the underlings' numbers would allow them to break through the defensive line, but they would be so wounded by that point that they wouldn't be able to endure the World Tree's sacred aura.

As a result, they would unceremoniously explode.

*I'm gonna need to come back later and check up on the World Tree's defenses, but it looks like they should be able to hold for now.*

The underlings' corpses were strange. Their ribs had sprouted outward like flowers. After casting a sidelong glance their way, Kaito headed for the entrance.

At the moment, the entrance was sealed by a tangled web of ivy. The various



shades of green were wound together so tightly that not so much as a caterpillar could get in. It looked almost like a wall that had stood idle for centuries.

However, when Kaito arrived, the door began writhing without even waiting for the doorkeepers' orders. The ivy peeled away, forming a hole through which he could enter. Much to the doorkeepers' surprise, the World Tree had extended Kaito a warm welcome.

It was undoubtedly the wills of the Three Kings of the Forest at work.

"G-good work out there. Enter at your leisure."

"Thanks, you too. It looks like the defensive line is holding up pretty well, so none of the enemy forces should be able to reach you unscathed just yet. You guys can take it easy for a bit longer."

"Yes, sir."

The doorkeepers bowed their heads. However, their tails had curled up unbidden. They'd failed to conceal their fear. Pretending not to notice, Kaito walked inside alone.



The Three Kings of the Forest still hadn't left the room they shared, which was beside the underground lake on the World Tree's lowest level.

Even after the Mad King's advent, the three of them had stuck firmly to their policy of neither reigning nor governing. Given the World Tree's reactions, though, it was clear they'd been getting information from the imperial family and had made some sort of judgment.

*Well, they don't seem hostile toward me, at least. That's something to be thankful for.*

As he was thinking, Kaito kept walking. The inside of the World Tree resembled that of an ant colony. Holes ran across the walls every which way, leading to rooms of various sizes and complex sets of passages. It made for a location that was easy to defend and hard to attack.

Because of that, various important members from other races were permitted

to take shelter here as privileged guests. Kaito had heard the young human king was afraid of war and had squirreled himself away in one of the guest rooms. There was no shortage of people lamenting his fragile spirit, but Kaito didn't care much one way or the other. As long as the king didn't hand down any stupid orders, that was plenty as far as Kaito was concerned.

*By promising them preferential treatment in protecting their land and riches, I was able to sway all the aristocrats the king left in charge to my side, except the Church diehards. La Christoph assembled the saints. And there isn't anyone in the paladins or their subordinate group, the Royal Knights, who'll get in my way, either. I don't have anything in the way of formal supporters, but bit by bit, things are moving along. It would be a pain if the king went and got in the way now.*

The king had value simply by virtue of being alive. Kaito asked nothing more of him.

The person whom Kaito had come to visit was somebody else entirely.

As a matter of fact, the issue of their custody had been the subject of no small amount of debate among the dignitaries.

Kaito continued deeper and deeper down through the holes. The farther down he got, the fewer people he passed by, so much so that it started becoming hard to believe everyone was in a state of high alert. He began wondering if all those who worked here had just vanished.

After following the winding, spiral-shaped corridor, Kaito finally reached the very bottom.

The ground lost its slant and became level. The path veered off to the left, but it was blocked off by entangled roots. At first glance, it looked like a dead end. Yet in spite of that, there were human, beastfolk, and demi-human soldiers stationed before the wall of roots. Kaito stopped in front of them.

The eagle beastman with vestigial wings on his arms bowed. The demi-human and human soldiers gave no response.

Kaito took a deep breath, then spoke.

"I heard she woke up. I got permission from representatives from every race,

the Church aside, to interrogate her. Let me through.”

“Understood. Please go on in.”

As the beastman replied, the World Tree moved. The roots creaked as they shifted to the side.

All the obstacles had been removed, and a straight path extended forward. There was nobody there, and no ornamentation of any kind. There was only the pale-white corridor of unseasoned wood continuing onward.

Kaito gazed in earnest at the space. It threatened to throw his sense of time out of whack. Then he gently raised a hand.

“Thanks. I’m heading in.”

“You know who it is you’re dealing with. Don’t let your guard down.”

“And make sure not to hurt her.”

That last bit had been appended by the human soldier. The demi-human was silent, as expected. Their intense stares were focused on Kaito’s back as he went inside. The roots immediately writhed and reformed their wall. In other words, there was no turning back. Kaito nodded once, then started walking again. He continued on in silence.

Eventually, a boy wearing a scarlet outfit came into view at the end of the corridor. Kaito frowned involuntarily. The scene seemed sinister; it reminded him of a single drop of blood floating atop human skin.

*A single feather, sprouting from her pale arm.*

The drop of blood had quivered atop her white skin, then collapsed.

Kaito shook his head to clear away the image of what he’d seen back at the World’s End. Then he spoke in as cheery a voice as he could muster.

“Hey there, keep up the good work.”

The boy gave him a deep bow. He was a member of the Church, but he normally served as La Christoph’s attendant. He had no connection to the reconstruction sect. They hadn’t found out about the awakening yet.

Kaito gazed intently at the boy. The boy nodded, as though in understanding.

He then took a step to the side.

A door bearing the coat of arms of the Three Kings of the Forest came into view from behind his scarlet-clad back.

Kaito pressed his finger against its engraved surface. When he pushed, the door swung open so easily, it was almost anticlimactic. A heavy silence rose up to greet him. Just like the corridor, the room within was completely white. It was like a hospital, or perhaps a prison. It was almost completely empty; the only piece of furniture within was a modest bed.

Atop the bed's clean sheets sat a thin woman.

Her long, black hair ran down her slender back like a veritable river. She should have been able to hear the door opening, but she just sat motionlessly, her gaze fixed on the wall. However, there was nothing there.

The room was located at the base of the World Tree. It wasn't like it had any windows.

Yet still, she stared at that single point, as though to say there was something she could see.

"Well, Miss Saint, how are you feeling?"

Even Kaito himself could make out the sarcasm in his voice.

The woman twitched, her shoulders moving for the first time. She slowly turned around.

She was the Laughing Woman, the one whom Valisisa's private army had retrieved from the World's End.

And she was the Suffering Saint, the one who'd destroyed the old world and brought about the rebuilding.

The Saint's eyes were perfectly clear, and they reflected Kaito like mirrors.



"I'm not the Saint anymore, you know."

Those were the first words that came from the Saint's mouth.

She calmly shook her head. Her sleek, black hair shook, casting a ring of light.

From her appearance, she seemed young. However, her behavior revealed an elderly spirit, and the impression she gave off was that of a mother who'd borne countless children.

Kaito slowly narrowed his eyes.

It was true; at the moment, she was neither crying tears of blood nor strung upside down. She was simply sitting, clad in the white garb of a patient or a prisoner. She didn't look the part of the Saint in the least.

But Kaito repeated himself.

"No, you are the Saint. You're the one who destroyed the last world, who carried out the rebuilding, and who created this current world. You're the Church's object of worship, the Suffering Saint, the mother who gave birth to everything. Are you not?"

"The Church's object of worship... True...I am. I...was. I know...that much. It's vague and faint and indistinct...but I know that much. Just...as I expected. I became an object of worship. They respected me...revered me...believed in me. Bah, what a load of shit!"

Suddenly, her voice went shrill. While there was no zeal in her tone, her words had a frightening amount of loathing packed into them. Her lamentation struck Kaito like a knife.

He waited silently for her to continue. The Saint clacked her eerily straight teeth.

"They don't know the first thing about me."

She practically spat out the words, her voice steeped in malice. Then she turned back around and fixed her gaze on a single point on the wall. It was almost as if she could see something. When she continued, her voice was dispassionate.

"Yet even so, I was alone for so, so long."

Her words cut off.

She said no more.

Then once again, she was still. Her silence was so deafening that it made it



hard to believe she had ever been talking.

Kaito shook his head and snapped his fingers. Azure flower petals and black darkness swirled as he created a small chair for himself. This time, it was simple and wooden, well befitting the room. As he sat down upon its narrow seat, he gazed at the Saint's skinny back and conspicuous shoulder blades. From behind, she seemed cold, as though she were rejecting the very world itself. He spoke:

"Will you tell me about it?"

"About what? At this point, what is there to talk about? The end is nigh. Nigh, don't you know? The end-time...hee-hee...hoh-hoh-hoh!"

The Saint's frail shoulders shook as she lapsed into an unsettling fit of laughter.

Kaito waited patiently for her to finish, then let out a heavy sigh. When he spoke, his voice had a stubborn kindness to it.

"You've been fighting your own battle all this time, haven't you? And if that's the case, then I'm sure there was something you held inside yourself the whole while. Something that no one ever tried to look for. But maybe now it's time to tell the truth."

"...The truth?"

"For the longest time, people just believed that you carried out the rebuilding. That, as the Suffering Saint, you bore the burden of all their sins. In reality, though, you're a sinner without peer, the woman who single-handedly destroyed the previous world. What did you do? What was it you were trying to atone for?"

At that point, Kaito trailed off for a moment. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists tight.

Scenes from the World's End flashed in the darkness behind his eyelids. His face contorted wildly. However, the Saint's back was to him, so she was oblivious to his change. In order to set her mind at ease, or perhaps to get her to speak carelessly, Kaito maintained calmness in his voice alone.

"Why did you throw it all away?"

“It was too much.”

Her response was immediate. Kaito was taken aback. The Saint turned to face him again. Her unnaturally sleek hair draped across the bridge of her shapely nose. Her eyes were serene, but there was no life in them. They looked just like the sky at the World’s End originally had—hollow. Her lips, on the other hand, were red and vibrant, and as the mother of all living creatures gave her statement, they contorted with a strange tenderness.

“Yet despite that, you people weren’t worth enough for me to keep bearing it.”

*Not in the slightest*, she seemed to imply.

For a moment, Kaito felt a flash of gratitude at the fact that he was the only one who’d heard those words.

If anyone from the Church had heard them, that alone might have been enough for them to kill themselves. After all, they’d been cruelly discarded by the very entity whom countless people had spent generations praying to and worshipping.

A heavy silence descended upon the two of them. Kaito was the first to break it.

A gentle smile spread across his face, and with a brief nod, he threw his arms out wide.

“Yeah, I feel you. That makes sense.”

“...I beg your pardon?”

The Saint looked over her shoulder, flustered. She clearly hadn’t expected him to understand where she was coming from. It was the first time any real humanity had come across in her behavior.

As he faced the confused woman, Kaito went on earnestly.

“It makes sense that you’d feel like that. After all, prayer is supposed to be a one-way street. Whoever’s being worshipped doesn’t have any obligation to receive it. And the truth about the Saint was kept under wraps for ages. Anyone who knew even a piece of the truth was suppressed, and everyone else just

blindly trusted what was laid out in front of them without even trying to notice how contradictory it was. They just worshipped you without a care in the world. *If we do this, we'll be rewarded. If we do this, we'll be saved.* From your perspective, them believing that nonsense was probably a sin in and of itself. And I'm not here to tell you otherwise."

"I..."

"But y'know, *who gives a shit about all that?*"

A kind smile still plastered across his face, Kaito reached his arm out. The Saint's throat was as thin as a swan's, and Kaito squeezed it with one hand. His gentle expression didn't change in the slightest.

The Saint tilted her head to the side a little. However, that was her only reaction. She couldn't even comprehend what was happening. It was only when Kaito lifted her slim body into the air that she started kicking her legs.

Still holding her with one arm, Kaito rose from his chair. His voice was quiet and calm.

"After all, *you* don't know the first thing about *me*, do you?"

The Saint's cheeks quivered. She was about to refute his statement and murmur that she did know him, but she stopped midway. A look of bafflement floated across her empty eyes. As the Saint, she was acquainted with everything she'd birthed, even if that knowledge was only slight. Yet the boy standing before her seemed to be one of the few exceptions.

Just as nobody had known who she truly was—

—she knew nothing about him.

"This body of mine is artificial, and the soul inside isn't one of your descendants. What that means is I don't have to sit here and listen to you spill your guts like some whiny fucking kid. I mean, if you were anyone else, I probably would anyway, but still."

Kaito was a reasonably compassionate person. As far as the Saint was concerned, though, he had no sympathy to spare. He closed his eyes and forced himself to recall the things he'd seen back at the World's End.

A woman bound by briars. Black feathers sprouting from her body and blooming into azure roses. A pained smile spreading across her beautiful, bloodstained face.

Kaito's cheek twitched, as though he was fighting back tears. When he opened his eyes, though, they were dry. His voice went a tone deeper.

"Unfortunately, I'm so pissed off at you that I could kill you three hundred times and not be satisfied. So why don't we just have a nice little chat about how things went down earlier? Depending on how our conversation goes, we might be able to part ways without me having to test how much you can *really* endure."

The Saint's expression froze. Ever since the world's creation, she had been in constant agony. By all rights, she should have been beyond fear. Yet her composure, which had been born from having tasted everything the world had to offer, crumbled.

Standing before her was something *unknown*.

Her thoughts thrown into disarray, a hoarse voice escaped the Saint's mouth.

"I... No, you..."

"The two of us should get along and part ways as *friends*. Wouldn't you agree?"

Suddenly, Kaito released his grip, and the Saint collapsed. After plopping back onto the bed, she began violently coughing. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked up at Kaito. At the moment, she was sheltering neither God nor Diablo in her body. All she had available to her was her natural aptitude for magic.

What could those eyes of hers perceive within Kaito? The Saint clutched at her own trembling shoulders.

"You're...you're not...one of my creations. No...you're not...even... Who *are* you?"

"I wonder. Who do you think I am?"

Kaito turned the Saint's question back on her. Memories of a nostalgic voice echoed within the depths of his ears.

It felt like it had been over a century ago when someone had called out to Kaito in that voice.

*“Butler,”* she’d called him. *“Fool.” “Kaito.”* Her voice had been resonant, free from any sort of modesty or restraint.

Of course, even with her gone, there were still people left who would call out to him. At the moment, though, those people had been separated and spread out across the land. All of them were following Kaito’s orders and working to fight against Diablo.

And so, alone, the boy acting as the Mad King shrugged.

Several gruesome strands of blood dribbled from his lips.

When the individual responsible for the fate of the world smiled this time, it was a completely different smile than the one he’d worn before.

*“Truth is, I’m not sure even I know anymore.”*

His tone was detached, and his words were as light as the wind. Yet at the same time, they carried with them a deep sadness.

Furthermore, his clumsy smile was too broken to truly be called human.

The Saint gazed vacantly at his comical, pitiable state. A length of time passed, and it was certainly not a short one. Suddenly, though, the Saint’s expression changed, and once again, she adopted the kindly demeanor of a mother.

It was unclear whether it was his deranged cheerfulness or his grief, which was as deep as the ocean, that had gotten through to her. All that was clear was that the stubbornness she’d borne until then had vanished without a trace.

*“This is a tale from long, long ago.”*

And with that, the solitary woman began narrating.

It was a story from long, long ago. A tale too horrible to be called Genesis, too tragic.

But it was also far too twisted to pass off as a fairy tale.



# La Christoph

~~~~~  
A high priest who was canonized as a saint while still alive. The Modest Birdkeeper. He normally binds himself with thick chains, but unlike La Mules, he himself chooses when to release them. His chest is cut away, clothes and all, and the skylarks contained within his exposed rib cage are all divine beasts.



4
**A Tale
from Long,
Long Ago**

F r e m d T o r l o n g h e n

4

A Tale from Long, Long Ago

This is a fairy tale.

Those who wish to refer to it as such are welcome to do so. But it is a horrible tale as well.

One way or the other, it's a tale from long, long ago.

Not only were all records of the old world annihilated, but they were also purged from the flow of time itself. No methods remained that one could use to learn what happened there. *She* was the only person who could testify to the events of the old world.

She was the beginning and the end, the slaughterer and the mother.

"Back then, my world was engulfed in war."

The Saint began giving her account. Kaito frowned lightly.

As she told it, the old world wasn't ruled by nations, but by a number of independent organizations and powers all vying for hegemony. Bound by their own interests and motives, they twisted the bloody annals of history for the sake of justice, hatred, and greed. At the end of the day, though, the sources that led to this tangled situation were surprisingly simple, and it was possible to classify them into two broad categories.

Racial conflicts were escalating, and people's capacity for magic was advancing too quickly.

The former had strewn the seeds of conflict throughout the world, lending each side a different sense of justice and pretext to rally behind. The latter made it so that organizations with powerful individuals and skilled mentors could attain military strength surpassing that of nations. In other words, the old world was what the current world would be like if the balance of power got

thrown out of whack after the current world spent another few centuries developing. However, while the existence of higher entities—God and Diablo—had been proven in the old world, nobody had been able to come into contact with them directly.

“Perhaps that world, too, was rebuilt from the ashes of destruction, or perhaps it was the first world God had ever created. I do not know. However, the old world had no religion that held the Creator in reverence. While the general indifference toward God helped spur on the wars, the fact that the Creator offered no guidance was what led to the assumption that it was impossible to interact with the higher entities. Because of that, the world managed to avoid both being attacked by demons and having God descend. Or it did, but...”

“But then you were born.”

“Indeed. I was.”

Upon hearing Kaito’s murmur, the Saint nodded.

Sometimes, the birth of a truly unprecedented prodigy could bring about massive change in a world.

When the small farming village she called home was set ablaze and her family was massacred, her latent talents came into bloom. After being taken in by the state, she became the youngest-ever graduate from the magic academy she was tossed into, then began wandering from war front to war front, working as a weapon of mass destruction. One day, when she gazed upon the scorched earth that she herself had caused, she found herself struck by a certain question.

From her perspective, humans, demi-humans, and beastfolk were nothing more than fragile ants.

Why, then, did such feeble beings feel the need to kill one another?

While she quickly realized the abnormality of that thought and hid it thereafter, her magical aptitude was far beyond what the logic of her world accounted for. Because her country had obtained a powerful mage by sheer chance, it was able to put together a plan to reclaim some territory it had been

sorely missing for many years, but she herself quickly lost interest in such petty affairs.

In the beginning, the reason her family had been torn to pieces and burned alive had been because the enemy nation had given weapons to the beastfolk who lived near her village. However, she didn't hate them, nor did she hold a grudge. Unraveling the truth behind the tragedy further revealed the honorable beastfolk would never have committed such atrocities if not for the fact that her very motherland had betrayed them. Upon delving further, it became clear that the original reason behind the conflict involved suspicions that another nation altogether was meddling in their affairs.

When one obtained transcendental power, the whole world started to look flat.

The conclusion she arrived at was that the entire cycle of hatred was meaningless.

"I just— I found it peculiar."

With unclouded eyes, she'd taken in the situation as a whole. War had driven the country to poverty, and its people's hearts could bear no more. The whole continent was being stripped bare, and if things continued on along the same path, all sides were headed for mutual destruction. However, she quickly came to understand something.

Everyone was already well aware of that fact. Yet they had no means by which to stop.

Every party was terrified of falling behind, so the magical arms race was spiraling out of control. Nobody even knew the state of their own research, and nobody felt they could afford to stop. Economies and supply lines were converted to support the war efforts as well. Some people felt armistice would prove disadvantageous to them, so they devoted their wholehearted efforts to throwing fuel on the fire. Their education systems were designed not to teach children about the consequences of their actions, but to brainwash them and instill hatred deep in their hearts. With each successive generation, people stopped questioning the war more and more, even as its original purpose was lost to obscurity.

There was no country large enough to serve as a mediator, nor was there one powerful enough to secure a decisive victory.

Eventually, she arrived at a conclusion of her own. A certain entity would be necessary to free them all from the quagmire.

“Such as a powerful deterrent—the likes of which didn’t exist.”

For example, something like God or Diablo.

From her perspective, humanity, beastfolk, and demi-humans were all equal. Every living creature was ignorant, and every living creature was like a stupid animal.

That was why *she had to save them*.

After steadying her resolve to bring about salvation, she got to work.

As long as she could summon them, God and Diablo would be the most powerful forces in the world. She presented her thesis to her government, and just as she’d expected, she received a massive budget to carry out her research.

In the current world, summoning a powerful demon had the contradictory requirement that one must first consume a demon’s flesh. However, the old world’s magical techniques were centuries more advanced, and she herself was a vessel of such rare quality that her very birth was an astronomically unlikely event.

Thus, in a tiny time frame, she was able to come up with a method to summon higher entities, a feat that Vlad had once estimated would take the current world another two thousand years to develop. On that fateful day, though, she was unsuccessful in summoning God. As long as some sort of condition was unmet, God remained immovable.

After reaching that conclusion, she tried summoning Diablo instead. It manifested successfully— “—And the world broke.”

With a *pop*.

More easily than a soap bubble.



God creates the world, and Diablo destroys it.

Even the old world knew about these properties of theirs. However, because nobody had ever actually interacted with them, her estimations were overly optimistic. She'd summoned lower-ranked demons over the course of her experiments, but God and Diablo's reason for being was fundamentally different. The two of them existed solely as a system to rebuild and destroy. They didn't even have the framework necessary to carry out negotiations. And as supreme a vessel as she was, her lack of experience in dealing with higher entities left her with no ability to resist Diablo.

And so, through her body, it automatically carried out its task.

She didn't really remember what happened afterward, only that it felt much longer than it had actually been.

All she knew were the vague, nightmarish scraps of memory that remained.

Horrific figures blotting out the sky. Seas transformed into plains of black and crimson. Azure blades cleaving through the earth. Black titans. Parts of the sky transmuted into glass. Bubbles forming in the land. Her own stitched-together body. A cluster of roses in full bloom. Resentful voices, their resistance as short-lived as that of insects. Frail entreaties that, in the end, transformed into bloodthirsty jeers.

"Loathsome ■■■, repulsive ■■■, cruel, hideous ■■■!"

"A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, ■■■!"

And then when she came to...

...she was in a place with nothing in it.

If one was to describe that place, the most apropos comparison would be to a blank white canvas. Or perhaps a pitch-black canvas. Nothing meaningful was painted atop it. All the beautiful, warped art that had once been there had been scarred, then lost.

Forever.

Because of that, she had to carry out her atonement.

It wouldn't do for her to simply leave the world blank and empty. To that end,

she tried summoning God again. This time, the world had been destroyed, fulfilling the condition for rebuilding, and thus, God descended.

On God's orders, Diablo fell asleep. Having wrested back control, she removed Diablo from her body. However, her wish to annul her contract with it and return it to a higher realm went unfulfilled.

In order to annul her contract, she needed to give the order to Diablo directly. And as long as God was keeping Diablo in check, God's orders superseded and nullified those of His contractor. And annulling her contract with God first would mean having to give up on the rebuilding.

As she agonized over that dilemma, she tried to find a different solution.

Could she just renounce both of her contracts after completing the rebuilding? No, that, too, was impossible.

Once the new world was complete, God would be freed from the condition on which He had descended and would automatically fall asleep. And because she was sheltering God within her body, so too would she. God operated under a rule where He had to rebuild, then sleep, and she lacked the power necessary to obstruct this for long enough to take any other actions. She couldn't even kill herself by forcibly releasing her contracts.

If she had been powerful enough to control God completely, perhaps another option would have presented itself to her.

However, that was beyond her.

Even so, there remained a method by which she could more or less escape. God desired a contractor so He could maintain His peaceful rest, but He wasn't picky about who that was. As long as there was someone there who wouldn't fall apart the moment the contract was formed, it would be possible to push the burden onto them. Of course, no such person existed in this clean, blank world.

At that moment, the only way she could die a human's death would be by abandoning everything.

Yet in order to carry out the rebuilding, she chose instead to live forever.

At that point, Kaito interjected.

“Wait, hold up. You were using God’s power to keep Diablo in check? So Diablo was sealed away in the underground tomb, and the only one left in your body while you slept was God?”

“Indeed.”

“Normally, Diablo can only manifest once God has decided the world should be destroyed. And once God rebuilds it, He stops Diablo from immediately destroying it again. Not to mention that unless the conditions are fulfilled, you can’t summon Him at all... Even though God’s supposed to exist to oppose Diablo, it sounds like He’s clearly the superior of the two.”

“Given my experience, I would have to agree. That’s why I was able to remove Diablo from my body with our contract intact but was forced to carry God with me that whole time.”

And whether or not God was inside her body, the fact remained that she was a peerless sinner. She bore the yoke of grave crimes upon her shoulders. That was why she’d had to build the skies, build the earth, and birth the seas. She had to make vegetation flourish across the land. She had to craft the moon and the stars. She had had to release fish and birds and beasts and livestock out into the world.

Then after making humans, beastfolk, and demi-humans, she rested.

That was the fate she had imposed upon herself. Fleeing her atonement would have been unforgivable.

As she silently rebuilt the world, she had a thought:

In the world to come, all would revere her. Unlike the resentful voices of those on the verge of annihilation she’d once heard, she would doubtless be hailed as a “Saint” and be offered countless commendations. She would be the mother of all who existed, after all. She would probably even be prayed to, hailed as the “Suffering Saint” who sacrificed herself for her children. Yet despite the praises she knew she’d receive, she felt neither pride nor gratification.

For the rest of eternity, nobody would ever consider what she had truly felt.

Without trying to learn what she'd been like before she'd become the Saint and her tale became embellished, they would have no way of even doing so.

But she had no intention of condemning them for that fact. That was simply the way the masses were. The same had been true in the world prior.

They would hear only what they wanted to hear, see only what they wanted to see.

Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. And that was the way things ought to be.

But at the end of that day, was that truly not a sin?

The ignorant had no right to cast blame, did they not?

She thought once more in that blank, white world.

Why had she tried to save them all?

Given how things had turned out, it couldn't have been described as anything other than a flight of fancy driven by a serious case of arrogance and conceit. A fatal mistake, one brought about from the sense of omnipotence that accompanied the possession of great power. Yet in her heart of hearts, she couldn't bring herself to consider what she had tried to do as worthy of scorn or rebuke.

It had been clear as day that if she hadn't done anything, the world would have fallen into ruin.

And it was just as evident that, even knowing that fact, nobody else had tried to act.

"Yet even so... I've been alone for so long."

She had fought on her own for so long.

She had fought to save them all.

She remained unforgiven, yet forgiveness was precisely what they would receive.

Therein lay an inescapable contradiction.

If that was the case, then didn't that make every person's entire way of life

fundamentally wrong?

She became obsessed with that notion. After troubling over that fact for quite some time, she created a hideous, adorable attendant—one who would serve only her. She instructed him to build infrastructure for trade so the new world would prosper. She also told him to teach the people basic information about her, God, and Diablo so that no one would ever repeat her mistakes. Then she decided to entrust Diablo's detached form to the people of the new world.

Moreover, she also gave him a lump of demon flesh.

"However, if the people of this new world choose to learn nothing..."

And thus, she sowed the seed of evil, ready to flower if anyone driven by zealotry and greed or anyone who would gladly act as an agent of destruction were to appear.

"In the end, I took too long to notice."

She had been assailed by profound regrets. After all, what had she been left with after salvation had been carried out?

In the end, what of hers, what of anyone's had she been able to save?

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Just like when she was young, she hadn't been able to save anything.

And because of that, it was only natural that nothing of value was born in the new world. After the destruction and restoration, the three races ended up making the same mistakes as before. People who sought power had arisen, swept away all others, and begun walking the path to annihilation.

Once again, her conviction was reaffirmed. All living creatures were nothing more than ignorant, stupid animals.

"There was nothing in this world worth protecting."

And when the solitary prodigy, the Saint, finally realized that fact— —she chose to set down her burden.

That was all.

That was all there was to the tragic— No, to the farcical tale.

“And they all lived happily ever after.”



For the third time, a heavy silence descended on the two. However, it was quickly broken by the dry sound of clapping.

Kaito had lifted his arms and was clapping his hands together. It wasn't intended in the slightest as an act of blasphemy against the Saint. He was just mutely praising her recounting of the tale. However, his action wasn't meant to demonstrate sympathy or pity, nor was it designed to express criticism. He himself knew an anecdote that the Saint's story reminded him of.

Once upon a time, there was a girl.

She tried to stop a man whom nobody else could stop. To do so, she became a sinner without peer.

Once upon a time, there was a boy.

As he obtained immense power in a crumbling world, he decided to save the ignorant, stupid animals. Just as the Saint had said, it was a decision steeped in arrogance. A terrible act of conceit. However, there was one clear difference in the way the Saint and the Mad King thought.

Kaito saw the stupid sheep as precious.

Humanity, beastfolk, and demi-humans are all equal. Every living creature is ignorant, every living creature is like a stupid animal, and every living creature is precious.

Also, the Mad King had a wish he was determined to see granted. He had boasted he'd save everyone, but at the end of the day, that was little more than an *afterthought*. He would never say it in front of the people who were entrusting their lives to him, but Kaito knew he'd discard the prospect of salvation without a second thought if it got in the way of his true objective.

He was well aware of how callous he was being to all but a few, how his unreliability verged on madness.

In other words, the salvation I'm trying to bring about isn't for anyone else's

sake. It's for my own, and I'm just selfishly doing everything I can to that end.

He thought back on what the Torture Princess had said at the World's End.

"Bear no conceits—saving the world and destroying it are but mere matters of personal selfishness."

Even if nothing remains, as long as I did everything I could, I won't have any regrets.

No matter what fate awaited him.

Having the dedication to shoulder everything on one's own for the sake of the weak and the downtrodden was noble, no doubt. But Kaito knew. The world wasn't beautiful enough to accommodate such selfless love.

It wasn't worth sacrificing yourself if you would ultimately regret having done so. After all, you wouldn't exactly be rewarded for your troubles. The world was a cold and unfeeling place. Yet contradictorily, it also contained something radiant within it.

Because of that, Kaito had sought to dig this item up. His blade had gotten stuck in the swamp, so he'd plunged his hands in instead. And after sustaining countless wounds, he'd grabbed hold of the jewel.

There was information he needed to do that, information he couldn't get anywhere else, and he'd just received it.

Kaito stood up from his chair, then began speaking to the Saint, who was staring at the wall once more.

"Well, sorry for making you tell me that long story. And thanks. I won't ask you for anything else. Various humans, beastfolk, and demi-humans will probably come by with some questions later, though. It sounds like the old world's magic was pretty advanced, so I'd appreciate it if you avoided letting any harmful information slip. It'd probably turn out better for you that way, too. If word got out about how important and dangerous the stuff you know is, your safety might be at risk. Odds are, there are people who'd be willing to use way nastier methods than what I just did to keep that information to themselves."

“You say...such foolish things... The bugle has been blown, the roses have bloomed, and the wings have spread. The end-time...is not nigh. It is *already here*, and yet...”

“Yeah, true. I mean, I’m sure that’s what you believe, at any rate. So I figure you should go live as you please. You were planning on dying the moment you set down your burden, but you were able to buy yourself a grace period before the end. The way I see it, nobody has any right to interfere with that.”

Kaito’s voice was kind. He was implying it would even be fine for her to use old-world magic to make her escape.

The Saint tilted her head to the side in a gesture one would expect from a young girl. Kaito had a vague sense of why she was acting so innocently. She’d gotten tired of trying to figure out whether he was a friend or a foe. Her unease was plastered across her face. She was no doubt hoping he would turn out to be a friend.

However, as he gazed at the woman who had nowhere in this new world to turn, Kaito lacked such kindness.

Unfortunately, I’m neither.

He had no intention of denouncing the woman for her solitary fight.

On the other hand, though, he held a strong personal grudge against her.

“You’re a normal person now, just like you wanted. Go on—live wherever you want and die however you like. But you’re the one who brought all this down on us. Don’t forget that.”

As he lowered his voice, Kaito snapped his fingers. Azure flower petals flashed around his wrist, and he nonchalantly sliced his own artery. Blood gushed from the gap between his glove and his sleeve.

The blood flew over onto the wall, then began writhing.

The Saint blinked. Before her, the blood had taken on a recognizable form.

A “window” had opened up in the underground chamber.

Scenes from the outside began projecting where the Saint had been staring at.

“...Ah—”

A faint noise slipped out of her open mouth. Kaito gave a short nod. The Saint had finally come to a realization. She'd been staring fixedly at the wall for some time, almost as though she could see something in it.

Yet in truth, she'd seen nothing, in every sense of the phrase.

“The ignorant had no right to cast blame, did they not?”

Kaito was ironically reminded of the quote the Saint herself had murmured mere moments ago.

According to the Saint, her recollections of the end-time were dim.

In other words, she'd never really seen the things outside that window before.

God and Diablo had both descended on the world at once. It was a situation that wasn't even supposed to be possible. Because of that, there were probably differences between how the destruction was currently progressing and how it had occurred in the old world.

However, the tragedy of the situation was identical.

Outside the window, blood was spraying, desperate screams were echoing out, and hundreds of crying voices could be heard.

Every scene unfolding there was actually happening somewhere in the world.

It could only be described as hell.



A giant, rabbitlike underling was grabbing the elderly alive and gnawing on them like carrots. A soldier carrying a cannonball was snatched into the air by some black thing and let out a shriek, before being returned to the ground as a pile of skin. A woman was frantically trying to get her crying children to stay away from her as a creature made of nothing but digestive organs melted her flesh. An armless demi-human was dancing an ecstatic, meaningless dance atop a mountain of charred corpses.

Because Kaito was linked to Diablo's pillar, he could sense the particulars of every person in every tragedy that was occurring.

He could sense them, and he had *abandoned them all*.

I can't save everyone.

Kaito wasn't a god. He could boast about saving the world, but it was impossible for him to save everyone from the personal tragedies befalling them. No matter how quickly he reached his hands out, it would never be fast enough.

And at the same time, he knew. The world was hell, and that wasn't just true at the moment. There were countless people begging to be saved. Each and every one of them was crying out just as desperately as Kaito had in his previous life.

"Help," they were crying.

"Please save me."

And Kaito had abandoned them without so much as glancing their way. Because of that, they'd suffered and died.

I have to make sure I remember that fact.

Kaito had decided his objective was more important to him than the world. He had no regrets. Given that, remembering seemed meaningless. It certainly didn't do the dead any good.

Even so, though, Kaito refused to let himself look away from reality.

Anyone who could forget something like that isn't worth the air they breathe.

When one possessed preeminent power, the whole world started looking flat. However, the end-time was fundamentally just the accumulation of countless personal tragedies.

Forgetting that fact would mean forgetting how to love the world.

The Saint gazed blankly at the scenes playing out before her.

She had undoubtedly once seen the fragments leading up to the end-time. However, at some point, without even noticing it herself, she'd become blind to the individual tragedies.

As he looked at her skinny back, Kaito suddenly said something wholly unrelated to the various horrors.

“The Butcher was a good guy, you know. Even though he betrayed us, I still liked him.”

The Saint cocked her head. She gazed up at him in wonderment.

Given her expression, *she hadn't understood what he'd just said. Ah*, thought Kaito. A momentary despair overtook him.

As it did, the Saint asked Kaito the very question he'd been expecting.

“...The Butcher?”

“Ah right. Yeah.”

Originally, the Butcher hadn't had a name.

He was the Apostle, nothing more than a seed of evil planted in the world. The Saint should have been able to perceive his actions. Yet she hadn't known he called himself the Butcher, nor the fact that he had been loved.

“And finally, thank you so much for your many years of patronage.”

The words Kaito had been told rang in his ears once more. He shut his eyes tight.

The Butcher had abandoned everything he'd enjoyed and canceled out all the memories he'd collected. He'd swallowed up the pain as he cut away both the feelings of those who'd shouted at him not to die, as well as his own arm.

All because he'd been told, *“Thank you for being born unto me.”*

That was all. Yet the person who'd told him that didn't even know what it was he'd sacrificed.

She hadn't even tried to learn.

“They would hear only what they wanted to hear, see only what they wanted to see.”

In the whole time they'd been talking, she hadn't mentioned him a single time.

Kaito drew in a deep breath, then slowly let it out. He spoke quietly, scratching at his faded-brown hair as he did.

“You said that ‘even so, you were alone for so, so long’... Meaning you endured it all alone, right?”

“I did. And it’s true.”

“Well, not quite.”

Kaito shook his head. After a brief moment of silence, he snapped his fingers and dispelled his simple, wooden chair.

The wound on his wrist had already closed up without a trace. His soles clicked rhythmically against the ground as he walked. Right before he reached the door, he stopped. His black coattails fluttered as he turned around.

The smile he was wearing could almost be described as kind.

“You just chose to be alone, that’s all.”

And now the Saint had no one.

Not even her hideous, adorable attendant.

The Saint looked around the room, baffled. The window was still there. Cruel hells were still displayed on its surface. Tragedies building to the world’s destruction piled up one after another. For the first time, the Saint’s face curled into a faint grimace. She was the one who’d caused those scenes to occur twice over.

They were what had come from her attempts to save everything.

The Saint called out to Kaito in a small, trembling voice.

“You...aren’t going to...kill me?”

“Why would I?”

As he answered her with a question of his own, Kaito’s expression was so calm that it seemed practically sublime.

Her response was immediate. She cried out, imploring and urging him.

“I’m a sinner without peer!”

“So?”

“You... Your grudge against me is so strong that even killing me wouldn’t

satisfy you, right?”

“Nah, I’m over it. *I don’t care anymore.*”

Kaito asserted his claim indifferently. Then with a casualness that befitted his tone, he pushed open the door. However, he stood still for a moment. Without turning around, he closed his eyes again.

The Butcher then appeared behind him, humming a strange song in the throne room. Elisabeth shouted at him, calling him an annoying lout. Their lively exchange blurred in the dim light, then vanished. With that, Kaito opened his eyes back up. He didn’t check the Saint’s expression or bearing. Still facing forward, he continued.

“Lucky you. You got everything you ever wished for.”

And then Kaito Sena closed the door.

For a moment, he felt like he saw a frantically outstretched arm in the periphery of his vision. Something rang in his eardrum.

Perhaps it was an entreaty, or an insult, or maybe some kind of question. However, Kaito didn’t even spare it enough thought to figure out which. He passed by the faithfully waiting doorkeeper boy and headed back. The exit was blocked, but he’d already known that.

That was why he waited until he couldn’t see the boy anymore, then stopped in his tracks.

“Geh, gah, bleh... Blergh—”

He bent over and hacked up a massive amount of blood. There were chunks of flesh mixed in with the red liquid that was gushing from his pale throat. Kaito squeezed his chest tight. After desperately regaining his breath, he looked up.

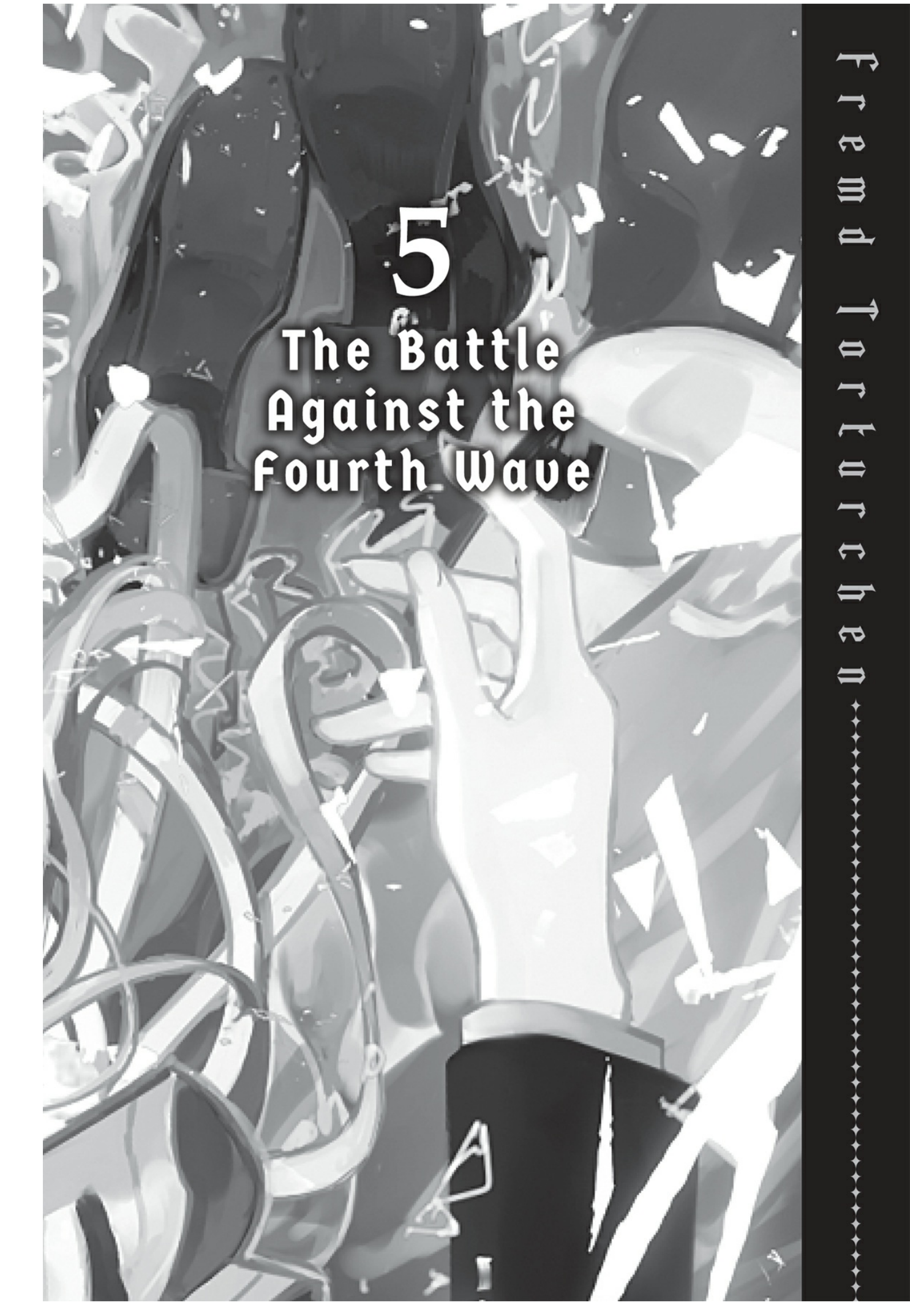
As horrible pain racked his body, he let out a fierce laugh.

“Fourth wave’s almost here, huh?”

He snapped his fingers. The blood spilled atop the floor wriggled, then started painting a magic circle. Azure flower petals flew through the white hallway. They formed a cylindrical wall with Kaito at its center, then cracked and vanished in a dazzling display of light.

When it was gone, it left nothing and no one in its wake.

And with that, the chance encounter between the Mad King and the Saint came to an end.



5

The Battle Against the Fourth Wave

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

5

The Battle Against the Fourth Wave

As the Diablo pillar released its fourth wave, a series of strange occurrences happened at the Northernmost Shore.

Black clouds surged across the sky, yet the ocean was still.

Lightning flashed, yet there was no noise.

The sound of waves rang out, yet the water didn't move.

The sea before the Northernmost Shore was as level as a mirror. This was certainly no natural phenomenon. Not even a sudden temperature fluctuation that'd cause it to freeze over would bring about such a state. The sea was calm, all the way to the distant horizon. It had completely forgotten to churn. Furthermore, it was slowly being dyed uneven shades of red and black.

As an experiment, one of the soldiers tossed a seashell into it. A loud *thunk* echoed out, and the shell bounced back. It wasn't just its appearance; the sea had physically hardened. The change had happened silently, making it all the more disquieting.

"Th-this is..."

"Hmm, it seems almost artificial. If I was to compare it to something...I suppose it's like if the glassworkers from the human capital all came together and crafted a single, giant pane of glass in order to maintain their skills. The scale of it is kind of impressive, not to mention ominous, but..."

With that, Valisisa snorted. She was right—the fact that the sea seemed to be covered by a red-and-black pane of colored glass was strange, to be sure, but it was more or less comprehensible. Eventually, the sea hardened as far as the eye could see. When it had, it transitioned to the second phase of its transformation.

Countless shadowy figures came squirming over the horizon.

The beastfolk noticed a strange sound, and they strained their ears to make it out.

What they got for their troubles were frigid shivers running down their spines. *Shluck, plop, shluck, plop, shluck*. The moist sound of flesh and fat sticking to something hard, separating, then sticking to it again was growing nearer.

Most of the underlings from the previous waves were winged, and they'd come flying in. However, it would seem the fourth wave was going to approach by crawling with their sticky bodies. The fact that the sea had been forcibly hardened over had likely been to accommodate their mode of advance.

The underlings seemed to be in no particular rush, and they crawled calmly beneath the surging black clouds and the red sunset sky. That said, their advance had a terrible sort of vigor to it. It was a contradiction that made it seem as though space and time themselves had been twisted. Suddenly, sublime cries ravaged the air. The beastfolk who had been listening to the footsteps all covered up their ears at once.

They could hear screams. The screams sounded happy.

They could hear laughter. The laughter sounded kind.

They could hear an address. The address was silent.

They could hear begging. The underlings were begging for death.

The voices sounded rich in emotion, but their actual contents were hollow. They sounded meaningful, but they were fragmented, and the fragments had no cohesion. It was all incoherent and jumbled. That was precisely what made them so eerily terrifying.

As they let out waves of unpleasant sound, the horrors finally revealed their full forms.

The moment they did, all the soldiers save the saints practically lost their will to fight.

They resembled humans. They resembled beastfolk and demi-humans, too. Yet at the same time, they were completely different from any of them.

The things had body parts from all three races. In a sense, their bodies were composed of “parts” alone. There was no clear delineation between their heads and their bodies. Their arms, legs, ears, hearts, lungs, and intestines all tangled and wrapped around one another as the things advanced. If someone took a body from a member of each race, sliced them up haphazardly, then stitched them back together as sacrilegiously as they could while making sure to leave the organs and the genitals exposed, that was probably what they’d end up with.

The very fact that they existed desecrated the dignity of the living.

The soldiers were assailed by terror. Despair at the prospect of being captured by those things, or worse, turned into one of them, filled the beach. Several people let out moans. Some vomited, and others defecated themselves.

“Ah... Ahhh... Ahhh...”

“Those possessed by fear, withdraw! My army has no use for fools who’d be defeated before even making contact with the enemy!”

Valisisa barked out a coolheaded order. Upon hearing her sharp rebuke, the beastfolk drew their weapons and held them at the ready. However, they couldn’t stop their ears and tails from putting their fear on full display.

That notwithstanding, they’d come back to their senses, and they raised a fervent cry to elevate their spirits.

“Come and get us, you monster freaks!”

The things responded with laughter. (And they were screaming, too.)

The things sang a song. (And they were silent, too.)

The things composed a prayer. (And they were jeering, too.)

The things wept loudly. (And they were laughing, too.)

The things responded with laugh— (—too.)

The things——— (———?)

The——— (———!)

“Shut *up* already.”

That moment, a listless voice echoed through the air. Its speaker hadn't been there a moment ago.

The vibrations in the air had transformed into a roar, but the voice had blown them completely away.

"Huh?"

"Whoops, easy there."

One of the soldiers gave a dumbfounded grunt. At the same time, a human figure touched down on the sea's surface with a casualness wholly unsuited to the gravity of the situation. As his black uniform flitted about in the rusty wind, the slender boy raised his head. The underlings' hideous forms didn't appear to scare him in the slightest. He seemed relaxed, which was eerie in and of itself. A different kind of unrest filled the air. But the boy paid no heed to the reaction he was getting. Instead, he raised his arm.

Then he gave his fingers a majestic snap.

"Recreation of the Plain of Skewers: Impaled Victim."

New colors danced atop the water. Azure petals and black feathers had begun raining extravagantly from the sky.

The next moment, a chorus of *thunks* rang out. The red-and-black-stained sea had been rent, and innumerable iron stakes had shot up from beneath the waves. Their sharp points had ripped through the frozen sea like they would an ice floe.

The normal, clear sea came rushing through the cracks. Then it was met with a huge amount of blood and quickly became stippled with crimson. After all, the underlings crawling atop its surface had been impaled on the stakes as well.

The way they were hoisted in the air, they looked almost like skewered game.

The blasphemous creatures awkwardly struggled, their mixed body parts squirming as they did. However, the iron stakes gave them no quarter. The evening sunlight washed over the stakes, the waves crashed atop them, and still, they stood resolute and immovable.

In that moment, the stakes resembled countless, glimmering headstones.

The person who had summoned the stakes, who'd just returned from the World Tree, was Kaito Sena.

"...Oh. I guess you can just impale them normally. All bark and no bite, huh?"

He nodded casually. He turned toward the soldiers, then shrugged. The gesture indicated he was hoping they'd affirm how much of a letdown the underlings had proven to be, but he received no such response. He blinked as he gazed over their stiffened bodies.

Eventually, he clapped his hands together, then called out to them in a loud voice.

"Hey, sorry about this, but I'm gonna need the saints to start firing. The fourth wave is still attacking. Normal weapons should be good enough to fight them. I'll cut down and skewer as many of 'em as I can, but I'm counting on you guys to deal with the ones that get away from me. Their exposed organs look like they should be weak points, but their mana actually comes from an eyeball hidden inside them, so watch out for that."

"You heard him, everyone. If you can destroy them, then do so. *We gather and wait.*"

La Christoph solemnly raised his arms as if nothing had happened. His expression didn't even have vestiges of confusion in it. He had just been calmly waiting for everyone else to settle down. In accordance with his directions, the saints began chanting in unison. Their bodies were clad in pure light.

A bit of confusion remained among the soldiers, but they got into formation.

After making sure everything had calmed down, Kaito nodded with a gentle expression on his face. However, it faded before long. The Mad King turned back to his fleshy foes. As he raised his arm once more, blood dribbled from the corner of his lip.

Then the Mad King murmured as the Torture Princess once had.

"*La* (oh ye, born of death, return from whence you came)."

And with that, he gave his fingers a sonorous snap.

"The enemy's moving differently now. I want to go make the rounds and

check up on a couple places; you mind if I head out?"

"You butcher a thousand of those things on your own, then pose that question like you're making small talk? You have my permission. Go."

"Y'know, I love how brief these conversations of ours are. It's a real lifesaver."

Kaito nodded to Valisisa, then placed his blood-filled glass orb down on the sand.

As the teleportation circle knit itself together, he cast his gaze out over the Northernmost Shore.

The fourth wave had been successfully wiped out.

A number of red-and-black shards that had been shattered by the stakes had washed up onto the sand. Underling corpses were scattered around them like beached jellyfish. A medic grabbed one of them with a hook, then struggled to pull it in. By analyzing the carcasses, they might be able to devise a counteragent for the venom the underlings had been spewing. A wolf-headed beastman went over and gingerly helped them pull the heavy corpse.

Elsewhere, crimson-clad attendants and uninjured soldiers were working to transport the freshly fallen saints and the wounded. On the other hand, the healthy saints who'd just returned to the battlefield were gathered together and receiving a status report.

They'd become rather adept at substituting people in and out. The soldiers and saints were even starting to intermingle to the best of their abilities. Perhaps it was because they'd successfully dealt with their horrific foes, but the soldiers' faces were all brimming with confidence.

Even though he saw things had changed for the better, Kaito still furrowed his brow. His thoughts raced vigilantly.

Those things looked creepy as hell, but the bodies of the fourth wave's underlings still fell within this world's rules. By the sixth or seventh wave, though, they'll have overcome that restraint. Normal soldiers won't be able to resist them, let alone react accordingly.

Despite knowing that, Kaito pushed that unsettling reality deep within his

heart.

Dampening the soldiers' spirits right now wouldn't do anyone any good. The underlings were only going to get more horrific from here on out. It wouldn't take much to break their will to fight. Kaito needed their resolve to be as high as possible when the fifth wave hit. To that end, he said nothing as the azure light swallowed him up.

The moment after the cylindrical wall surrounded him, his consciousness cut out.

The pain ceased, then came back. Kaito died from shock.

After automatically resuscitating, he slowly opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the mellow glow of the sunset.

"...Looks like the sky's cleared up over here."

After letting out a faint murmur, he looked to the side. He was standing atop a long bridge stretched out wide over the blazing, golden desert. Or to be more precise, the stone structure wasn't actually a bridge. It was one of the walls that divided up the demi-human territories.

In the demi-human country, the places people lived were determined by the purity of their blood. Its citizens weren't allowed to travel freely within its borders. Kaito was on top of the wall surrounding the second sector—more specifically, he was in a passageway designed for lookouts and repairmen.

At the moment, though, it was home to an imposing line of cannons.

The sound and tremors of cannon fire rocked Kaito's surroundings at fixed intervals.

"Ready, aim, fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiire!"

As directed, flames burst from the entire front row of small cannons at once. The pterosaur-like underlings who'd been struck let out annoyed cries. The damage they'd suffered was minimal. The demi-humans didn't pay that fact any heed, though, and pulled on the ropes connected to the wheeled cannons in order to draw them backward. As they reloaded them with shells and gunpowder, the second row began firing.

“Ready, aim, fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiire!”

GYAAAAAAaaaaaAAAAAAA!

Their bones broken by the successive fire, several underlings fell out of the air. All the while, more cannonballs were being brought up on pulleys. Any damage to the cannons was being taken care of atop the wall, too. Thanks to how efficiently the repair and transport teams were working, the repeated bombardment was being sustained for a length of time that hardly seemed possible.

It was an impressive technique, one that took full advantage of the country’s ability to mass-produce gunpowder and metal.

“Same as before, huh? Man, it’s crazy how long they’ve been able to hold out.”

Relieved at how hard they were fighting, Kaito looked around. The man he was looking for was standing a little way off from the cannoneers. Kaito raised his voice and waved his hand at him.

“Aguina! Aguina Elephabred!”

“Hmm? Oh, Sir Kaito Sena, are you making the rounds? And just Aguina is fine. I’m aware of how troublesome our surnames are for foreigners to pronounce. If you try too hard, you’re liable to bite your tongue.”

The bespectacled, lizard-headed man replied from beneath his coarse, sand-resistant robe.

The demi-humans had agreed with the beastfolk and, in doing so, had come under the Mad King’s jurisdiction as well. Given how the demi-human soldier at the World Tree had treated him, though, it was clear that not everyone was on the same page there. Depending on the orders he gave, they wouldn’t actively get in his way, but they wouldn’t always cooperate, either.

They were probably concerned about how things would shake out afterward and didn’t want to be known for having allied themselves with the Mad King.

Aguina’s words, on the other hand, were congenial. He, too, was an official who’d attended the three-race joint meeting. However, he was displaying a

certain degree of affection toward Kaito. And the reason for his attitude was surprisingly clear.

The demi-humans value blood purity above all else.

The third sector had suffered critical damage, but Kaito had stopped it from spreading to the first and the second; ever since then, their estimation of his battle prowess had risen steeply. Unlike how he was treated everywhere else, he was greeted on the battlefield's front lines with open arms.

In other words, this was thanks to how flexible and how brazen the demi-humans were.

The deafening sound of cannon fire continued. Kaito rushed over to Aguina to make sure he could be heard.

He covered one ear and raised his voice louder.

"The underlings in the fourth wave are different than the ones from before! Are you guys okay? It sounds like your cannons aren't firing as often as they were when I came last time. Is the enemy's attack subsiding or something?"

"Oh, you came up with a hypothesis without even checking. Perhaps it'd be best if you looked down."

"...Down?"

"Down."

Aguina nodded. His long sleeve rustled as he pointed one of his sharp claws downward.

Kaito obediently walked over to the edge of the wall and dropped to his knees. Squinting, he gazed at the distant ground.

"...Oh, I guess they came here after all."

A section of the sand was dyed hideous shades of red and black. Underlings had risen up from it and were using their moist organs as suction cups to crawl up the wall. Before they could reach the top, however, demi-human soldiers with cloths over the mouths rushed toward them. The scales decorating the soldiers' armor jingled as they tilted pungent jars over the side. Black sludge poured down from the jars.

After they finished drenching the underlings, a second group of soldiers threw lit torches at them.

Flames rushed up, and the underlings passed out. It was a simple, merciless defense strategy.

Kaito spoke, his tone half-shocked and half-impressed.

“Man, you guys are gutsy...and accurate. Didn’t the underlings’ appearances fill you with despair?”

“Ha-ha, not in the slightest. We children of the Sand Queen have nothing in common with those hideous, hodgepodge monstrosities. And with that being the case, what reason would we have to despair? We simply dealt with them the same way we would any dangerous beast of the desert. That said, it’s thanks to the main army at the Northernmost Shore thinning out their ranks that we were able to do so. If there had been more of them, we could well have been overrun. You have my thanks.”

Aguina laid his hand atop his chest. His words were laudable.

Kaito, still on his knees, looked up at Aguina. The boy faintly widened his eyes in shock.

“Well, there’s a surprise. I never thought I’d see the day when you actually thanked me for something.”

“Hmm? Back when you rescued the survivors from the third sector’s desperate predicament, then kept the damage in the first and second sectors to a minimum, surely I must have thanked you at least a few times.”

“Huh...maybe you did. We were both crazy busy back then, after all.”

“My goodness, we were. Dreadful, that was... I must confess, to tell you the truth, my memories of whether or not I properly showed my appreciation are somewhat vague.”

“So hey, since it sounds like you appreciate what the other races are doing, maybe you could tone down the blood-purity obsession a little?”

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m afraid I find your humor a little dull. Unlike the Three Kings of the Forest, our Queen has long since entered her eternal slumber.

Understanding the anguish of our constant decline is beyond other races.”

Aguina replied to Kaito’s suggestion with a dry laugh. It didn’t seem like he had any plans of revising his way of thinking.

Kaito heaved a deep sigh. He had his suspicions that this insistence of the demi-humans would lead to conflict someday. At the moment, though, he didn’t have time to worry about whatever racial conflicts may or may not be brewing.

There’s probably stuff that I’ll only be able to say now, but...I guess it is what it is.

Still seated, he looked out over his surroundings. The sand rose and fell uniformly, casting shadows in a truly majestic way. Back when he was in that tiny room, he could never have dreamed of seeing anything like it. He burned the image into his eyes.

As he did, he also checked to make sure there weren’t more underlings in sight than he thought the demi-humans could deal with. After determining their nearby numbers weren’t a serious threat, he nodded.

“Well, it looks like there aren’t any pressing problems here, so I’m gonna head out. There should be a way longer grace period before the fifth wave attacks. It shouldn’t hit until after midday tomorrow. If anything unexpected happens before then, get in touch.”

“Understood. If that happens, we’ll send word immediately.”

“Sounds like a plan. Guess I’ll do some light cleaning, then be on my way.”

“...‘Cleaning’?”

Still seated, Kaito leaned forward.

Then without a word, he dove headfirst into the empty air. His uniform fluttered as he glided.

Now upside down, Kaito looked up toward the top of the wall.

Aguina’s eyes were wide, and his back was illuminated by the afterglow from the setting sun. Kaito smiled at him, then cast his gaze over to the wall’s surface. Suddenly, horrifying creatures came into his view. New underlings were

crawling atop the charred corpses of their comrades and trying to climb up the wall. When he reached the same height as them, Kaito snapped his fingers.

“La (burn).”

Flames burst from within the hideous, fleshy masses. A moment later, nothing remained of them but ash.

Then they were scattered by the dry desert wind. As he fell amid the fine particles of ash, Kaito pulled the glass orb from his pocket and flicked it with his finger. The crimson orb descended toward the sea of sand like a drop of blood.

An instant later, a teleportation circle had woven itself in the air.

Gentle light spread out from the orb, like an azure rose in bloom. Kaito landed where the flower’s center would be, and the petals of light snapped shut.

And with that, Kaito began teleporting.

“...What is he, some kind of monster?”

The moment before his consciousness faded, he distinctly heard someone mutter that phrase.

However, he had no time to reply before the darkness took him.



He didn’t appreciate being seen as a monster, but it was more or less a reasonable assessment.

Kaito Sena was aware of that fact.

Great power carried responsibility with it. And at the same time, it represented something that was to be shunned. Fear, disgust, contempt, discrimination, hostility, avoidance—the forms of rebellion were varied. Yet sometimes, that power also garnered praise.

People were hostile toward things they couldn’t understand, and they worshipped people who were close to their ideals.

As far as people were concerned, anything too different from them had to either be a deity or a monster.

Thus, reverence and contempt were two sides of the same coin. Conventional

religious gods were one thing, but anyone who was deified would quickly also find themselves vilified, looked down on as a monster, and killed. Rebellion and praise were equally irrational things. However, that contradictory nature people had was in and of itself worthy of love.

The powerless feared the powerful and regarded them with hostility, but they also revered them and sought their aid. On the other hand, if they found themselves indebted to someone they'd once denounced as a monster, they would still throw their arms wide and protect that person. They could kill because of their self-righteous senses of justice, but a mere thought could be enough for them to lay their lives down protecting another.

That was just how people were. And not just humans, but the other two intelligent races as well.

Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. And that was the way things ought to be.

For if they weren't, they wouldn't be able to live with that contradiction.

Ignorance is a sin. But there's a kind of peace that can only exist inside it.

As for Kaito Sena himself, he was straddling the fine line between *god* and *monster*.

At the moment, he had declared he was going to protect the living. But the entity known as Kaito Sena was quickly becoming the most ominous thing around. As far as the world was concerned, he was now a foreign element, and where he'd originally come from had nothing to do with that fact. His rate of mana acquisition was accelerating. He was like a weapon that automatically enhanced itself.

He might well have been even more dangerous than the Torture Princess, the peerless sinner.

If he were to turn on the world, what would happen? Surely, the danger of that possibility wasn't lost on anyone.

Even while he was saving them, they were doubtless thinking, *The day will come when we have to kill him.*

But that's fine.

That was the decision Kaito Sena had made.

Every race had come to rely on him, but behind their smiles, their fear and bloodlust were rising. However, that process, too, was necessary for what he imagined would come after. That was why he didn't mind, no matter how much they ostracized him.

That was fine. It had a purpose. But...

...It is a little lonely.

That emotion, too, came from the heart. As he felt it, he thought:

Is this how you felt, Elisabeth?

After being vilified and bombarded with criticism, she had sentenced herself to die alone.

She wasn't a person who was capable of loving solitude. That was why—

That was why Kaito had—

"Ha-ha, I come here to meet you in person, yet your complexion is downright pallid, my dear successor!"

Wait, is it even possible for a voice to be that annoying?

Kaito snapped his eyes open. All the thoughtful reflection that had been going through his mind a moment ago vanished without a trace. He couldn't even remember what it had been about. Nevertheless, he blinked a few more times.

He shook his head to sweep away his vertigo. Then he looked up at the culprit who had so rudely shattered his postrevival silence.

The tall man in question stood against a backdrop of verdant-green trees. He was wearing a black coat and an aristocrat's shirt replete with a cravat. His sleek, black hair draped down to his shoulders, and his ruby-like, crimson eyes served to accentuate his androgynous beauty. He was the Kaiser's first contractor, the former leader of the fourteen demons, and Elisabeth's foster father, whom she had burned to death.

Vlad Le Fanu.

A smile was plastered across the man's childish face. Kaito reflexively let out an exasperated remark.

"Someone's in a good mood."

"And oh, how very! After all, I am but a child graciously bequeathed a brand-new toy! And yet even so, you will be pleased to hear that thanks to my astounding judgment and competencies, I have faithfully carried out every one of your orders! Why, I should think it only reasonable to allow yourself a little merriment in consideration for my labors... Although, it does seem you've died again. Can you stand?"

Vlad courteously extended a white-gloved hand to Kaito.

After hesitating for a moment, Kaito *took it*.

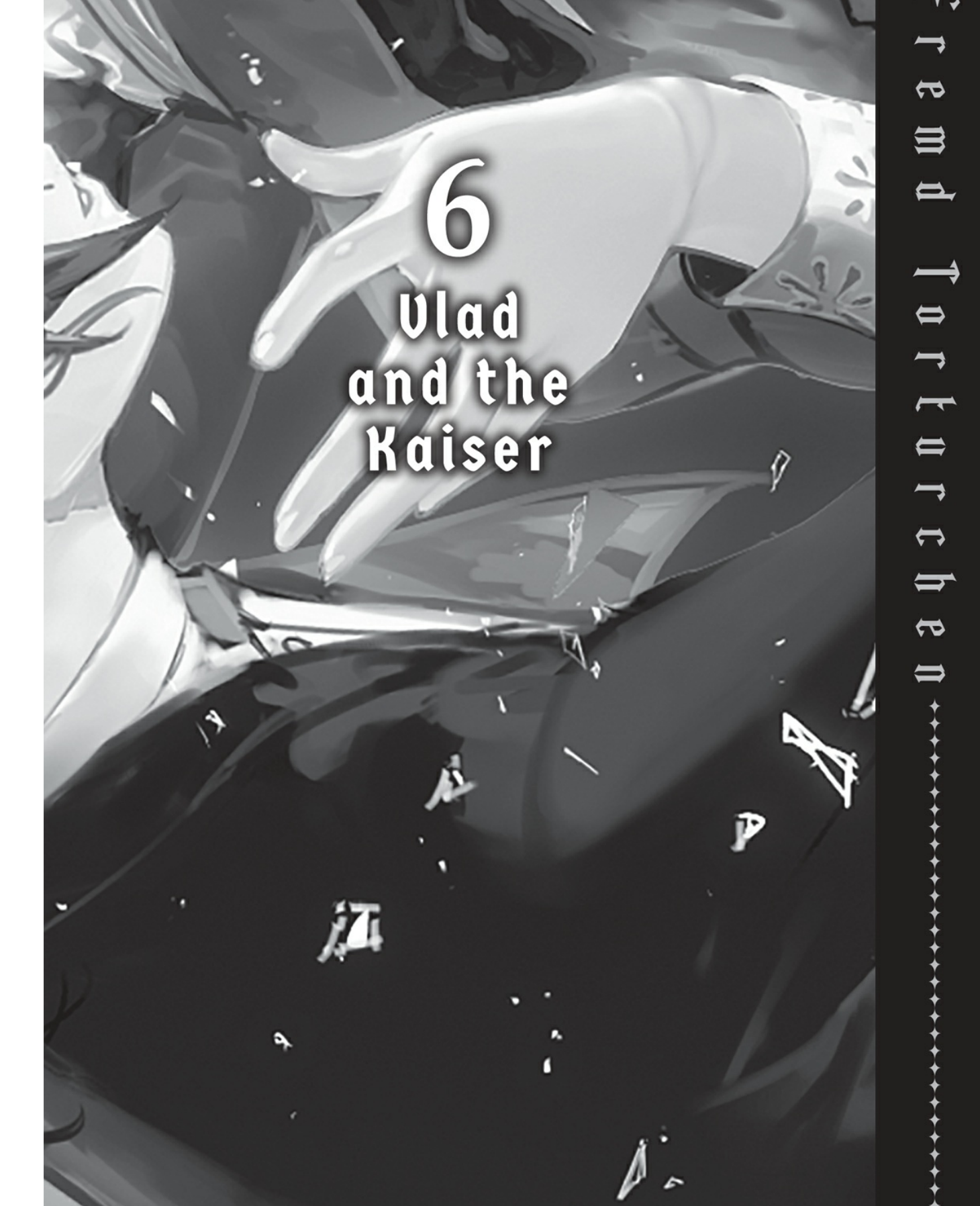
Until just recently, that action wouldn't have been possible. After all, Vlad Le Fanu's real body was dead. All that was left of him was a replica of his soul. But now he was no mere phantasm.

After helping Kaito to his feet, Vlad spoke with sincere delight.

"Being able to move as I please really does stir at my emotions. Truly, being alive is a wonderful thing."

And with that, Vlad Le Fanu nodded, a broad smile spread across his face.

The man who'd once been burned down to his very bones had attained flesh once more.



6

Vlad and the Kaiser

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

6

Vlad and the Kaiser

The man who had once been burned to death had risen from the ashes.

He had been resurrected through the same method that was keeping Kaito alive. He hadn't technically come back to life, of course; no method existed in this world that could completely revive the dead. Vlad's current state was nothing more than that of a degraded replica of the actual man's soul. He'd simply been transferred from the jewel he'd been sealed in into a golem body like Kaito's. However, being able to move around freely supposedly felt as if one had been resurrected.

Everything's more or less in order...or at least, it looks like it is.

After carefully inspecting Vlad, Kaito decided he'd passed muster. The fact of the matter was, Kaito himself was the one who'd given Vlad his body. If there were any problems with it, things could end badly. After all, Vlad Le Fanu was practically a demon himself. If the situation had been any less drastic, the prospect of freeing his soul and giving him a body would have been unthinkable.

Kaito thought back on the details that had caused him to make that insane choice.

The real Vlad had died with the replica of his soul still trapped within that jewel.

He was more powerful than even Elisabeth, yet he hadn't given his own replica a body.

Kaito suspected the primary reason for that was so that his replica would go undetected during the Church's investigation after his death. Vlad was probably also concerned about the possibility of having his own replica revolt against him if he ever accidentally activated it while he was still alive.

The replica was a degraded version of Vlad's soul, designed to pass along Vlad's will to future generations. It was able to act as an intermediary for the demon he'd once contracted with, but it was inferior to the actual Vlad in a number of respects. However, the two of them thought in exactly the same ways, meaning there was a chance it would betray him. After all, it was Vlad. There was a good chance he'd gleefully seize the opportunity to kill "himself."

Actually, it was a downright certainty.

The real Vlad had no doubt known that and, as such, had left nothing behind for the replica.

As a result, the Vlad within the jewel couldn't so much as move around on his own without Kaito's help.

Just a little bit ago, Kaito had agonized over whether or not it was prudent to change that condition.

Vlad Le Fanu was evil to the bone. Kaito couldn't let his guard down around him for a moment, something Vlad was well aware of. That said, it was hard to ignore Vlad's talents, either.

The fact that he'd stood atop all fourteen demons was a testament to his profound leadership skills. Why, the Kaiser himself referred to Vlad as "He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind." The way he thought was completely divergent from your everyday person. In other words, he was evil incarnate. And just like Vlad, Diablo could easily surpass the limits of human imagination. It was impossible for normal people to anticipate what it would think or do. Sometimes, the only thing that could defeat one evil was another.

Given the current situation, Kaito didn't have the luxury of worrying about the future. At the moment, they were in dire need of manpower.

If Vlad could move around on his own, his usefulness as a pawn would increase.

And so in the end, Kaito had decided to give Vlad a body.

However, it had come with a condition.



“Make sure you don’t get carried away and try to do anything evil. Your head’ll fly right off.”

“And therein lies the problem! I mean, I must say, I’m impressed with how you think, but still!”

Vlad, seeming strangely excited, pointed at Kaito. The two of them bantered aimlessly as they walked through the forest.

The trees around them looked like miniature versions of the World Tree, each one of them sporting an intricate array of foliage. The farther they went, the more shoe prints started appearing on the soft ground. Pure water seeped up from the earth, filling the indentations halfway.

“Your body is designed such that as long as it doesn’t lose an excess amount of its creator’s, Elisabeth’s, blood, your soul will remain within—in other words, it’s a kind of quasi-immortality. And now that you’ve obtained her heart and can generate limitless mana, that sole weakness of yours has been rendered null. Yet still, you chose to use a different method when you were creating my body. To think you would not transfer my soul but embed the jewel itself within my body! And you even had the gall to set a condition that would cause my head to self-destruct, jewel and all! I must say, my dear successor, you really do play dirty!”

“Are you complaining?”

“Oh, perish the thought! I find it ever so delightful!”

Kaito reflexively knit his brows. It would appear that Vlad was thoroughly enjoying his current situation. He was as inscrutable a man as ever. Perhaps sensing Kaito’s doubts, Vlad curled his lips slightly.

“Up until now, I’ve stood on the side that toys with the lives of others. I’ve held their flimsy hearts in my hands, caressing them as long as I pleased. Now that I find myself a victim of that same treatment, I’m hardly in any position to complain. Being able to experience sensations yet untasted in an unforeseen way is a delicacy, no matter what kind of sensation that may be.”

“So in other words, you’re not just a sadist, but a masochist, too?”

“Ha-ha, a crude way to put it, perhaps, but wholly accurate!”

“You weren’t supposed to agree, dude. That’s creepy.”

“Perhaps you find that difficult to understand, my dear successor. Normally, the two dispositions are at odds. But while I consider ruling to be my natural role, being forced to yield and made to bow my head is hardly unpleasant, either. Without supping on hardship myself, I would never know its true flavor. And what is life if not a constant voyage of learning?”

“Didn’t you die, like, forever ago?”

“That’s *precisely* what makes it so interesting. Compared with who I am now, the living ‘me’ lacked a certain sense of playfulness. Hmm, you can hardly blame him, though, given that he’d been betrayed by his beloved daughter, captured by the Church, and only just made his escape. Why, I feel downright sympathetic toward the man.”

Vlad shrugged aloofly. Not even his old, actual self was safe from his mockery. It was truly impossible to figure out how his mind worked. Astounded as he was, though, Kaito closed his mouth, offering little in the way of a response. And there was a good reason for that.

The sound of swords. The sound of flesh tearing. The sound of magical flames surging upward.

The tumult of the battlefield had come into earshot.

...Almost there, huh?

The main body of the World Tree was surrounded by both a deep forest composed of younger trees, as well as a strangely circular river, which was filtered and circulated through the roots. Those two lines of defense served to separate the World Tree’s hallowed ground from the rest of the world.

However, therein lay a fatal weakness.

The river’s full circumference was too vast for the soldiers to patrol it. And because of how erratic the underlings’ arrival locations and flight paths were, it was difficult to carry out a more focused defense strategy, too. Furthermore, it took four soldiers to safely kill a single underling, so a spread-out battle could well lead to them getting completely wiped out.

Given all those facts, establishing a defensive line turned out to be a major challenge. However, Vlad had come up with a diabolical plan to break through the deadlock. He'd inflicted massive, linear damage to the forest surrounding the World Tree.

In fact, he'd burned down enough trees to make a path right to it.

The underlings weren't capable of complex thought, so they naturally flocked to the opening in order to avoid the forest's sacred aura. It then became possible to defend against these foes, but the plan drew an understandable amount of backlash. The beastfolk in the army practically started an insurrection.

If things had gone poorly, we'd have had bloodshed on our hands...and probably worse. Good thing Vyade worked so hard to back us up. If Valisisa had been the one to find out, there's a good chance she woulda killed me.

After they'd gotten help from the second imperial princess and suppressed the rioting, the defensive front had solidly held the line. That said, showing up directly at the front line would have been dangerous. Instead, Kaito had teleported to the forest's outer limits and walked to the battlefield on foot. Vlad must have sensed that Kaito would stop by to check up on the war efforts. Then he'd come and fetched Kaito from where the man had predicted he'd arrive.

The front line should have been coming into view any moment. As he walked restlessly, Kaito shot Vlad a question.

"Anyway, given that you came all the way over to pick me up, I guess things are probably going okay... The fourth wave was different than the other ones. How are things on the ground?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha, how very like you. Always so quick to change the topic. As for your question..."

Suddenly, Vlad stopped talking and snapped his fingers. Azure petals and darkness whirled violently around his elegant palm and the white glove surrounding it. Then the trees in front of them toppled over. Their branches were cleaved up, like they'd been struck down by blades.

All at once, Kaito's field of vision expanded. A wide riverbank burst into view. After taking a moment to catch his breath, Kaito whipped his head around. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Vlad, who for some reason was puffing out his chest proudly.

"...it would be fastest for you to see for yourself."

"Well, that doesn't look good."

Before he had time to think, Kaito let out his honest impression.

The spectacle spread out before them was rather grim.



A clear river flowed calmly on the other side of the riverbank surrounding the forest. Or at least, it was supposed to. Now, though, parts of it had hardened into blotchy red-and-black chunks. Compared with the holiness of the World Tree proper, the water wasn't nearly as powerful. Apparently, the underlings had enough resources to pollute the river, and a considerable number of them were crawling atop its contaminated surface. Slowly but steadily, the blasphemous creatures were making their way forward.

As Kaito watched, the seemingly sluggish masses of flesh leaped at several of the soldiers at an alarming speed. They didn't even have time to scream before they were consumed. It was the very image of Hell.

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling shriek rang out from nearby. Kaito turned to look toward where it had come from.

"...!"

"Ack, gah, ah—"

A priest, who was supposed to have been strengthening the squad's defenses, was violently convulsing. An underling had been traveling beneath the ground and, as distasteful as it was, had thrust its arm through his groin. Burrowing through the moist earth had caused its hideous fingers to burn and fester from the pure waters underground. Now those same fingers had burst up through the priest's mouth and were squirming amid his yellowed teeth.

"Gah, geh— Ah..."

Then the underling abruptly drew its arm free, and the priest collapsed to the ground. Blood and excreta gushed from his body.

The underling then waved its sullied hand about and started looking for its next prey. An instant later, it found itself run through with a sword. The eyeball hidden amid its organs crushed, the underling's body crumpled.

"You monster... You monster, monster, monster, monster!"

Spittle flew as the soldier shouted and brought his sword down on the underling over and over. He sounded deranged, but his aim was true. He hadn't been misled by the underling's repulsive exterior. Vlad must have given them instructions regarding their weak points. That said, the squad's coordination had completely fallen apart. Friends and foes were all jumbled together, and the battlefield was a free-for-all.

Vlad stroked his chin, then shrugged in exasperation.

"I never imagined the situation would degrade so badly in my brief absence. The defensive squads were supposed to be continuously deployed, and the mages were supposed to set the opposite shore on fire in a massive, raging blaze. Anyone who broke through would be surrounded by the soldiers, battered, then allowed to escape once they'd sustained heavy damage, only to explode from the power of the World Tree. That process should have been more than enough to deal with the fourth wave, but... Perhaps their replacements fled on them, and the cowardice of a few sent everything into disarray. Ha-ha, what are they, children cowering at monsters? Well now, this is unfortunate."

"Given the situation, what the hell did you think would happen when you sent their commanding officer, not to mention their strongest teammate, over to pick me up?"

"Ha-ha-ha, you say that, my dear successor, but it's really quite hard for me to grasp just how frail these people's spirits—"

"...Vlad."

Kaito moved his lips as little as possible as he barked out Vlad's name. Vlad was still smiling, but he went silent.

He looked down at his petite master, then spoke in a stubbornly calm tone.

“Yes?”

“Don’t screw around.”

The rebuke was like a blade pressed against the back of his neck.

Another scream rose up from the soldiers’ ranks. Blood sprayed violently across the ground. However, even though he was right beside the tragedy, Kaito kept his gaze fixed on Vlad. The only thing reflected in his clear eyes was his wicked servant.

“Why did I give you a body? I brought you back for one reason: You’re useful. If you’re not being helpful, then you’re in the way. If you can’t show off your power, you’re just weak. If you fight without information, you’re just a fool, and if you whine pointlessly, you’re just incompetent. And hey, if your life has no value, you’re no better than a pig. So which one are you? Incompetent or a pig?”

Vlad didn’t answer. However, he didn’t talk back, either. He just kept smiling.

“Get it together! Dammit, don’t let them escape!”

Suddenly, a panicked shout pierced the air. Most of the underlings had made their way through the free-for-all and were finally surging toward the burned path to the World Tree. The soldiers who’d been able to keep their composure were rallying the troops and getting ready to pursue them. However, the underlings spat venom at them from their thick lips, the majority of which were attached to female buttocks.

“*La* (send it back).”

Without so much as sparing them a glance, Kaito snapped his fingers. Black darkness and azure petals knit together into a massive shield. It gently caught the venom, then launched it back. Upon being drenched headfirst in the viscous, purple liquid, the underlings collapsed.

The soldiers let out cries of surprise and relief. Having finally noticed Kaito, they sent pleading glances his way. But Kaito himself was still glaring at Vlad. His next question was posed in a voice that left no room for argument.

“As I am now, you’re a fitting minion for me—*right?*”

“Yes, my lord. It is as you say.”

Placing his hand atop his chest, Vlad abruptly hung his head obediently.

His androgynous, black hair shook as he performed his graceful bow. His head still hung, he spoke in a voice that was the very image of a loyal servant’s. It was so courteous, he sounded almost suspicious and affected.

“It’s true; I myself made the choice to become the Mad King’s pawn. And that being the case, it’s only logical I should carry out your will. Right now, Vlad Le Fanu’s madness exists for your sake—ah, what a new form of humiliation that is, and what a pleasurable one.”

Vlad contorted his lips into something that definitely wasn’t a smile. It was an unpleasant expression, one that incited fear in any who viewed it.

The next moment, his body vanished. The soldiers let out restless shouts. With utmost composure, Kaito alone turned his gaze overhead. There, he saw an aristocratic, black coat fluttering in the wind.

Vlad Le Fanu was suspended in the sky.

He was sitting on someone’s back, with both legs to one side. Right beside him, bat-like membranes cleaved through the air. Two wings were growing out of the fine, black fur Vlad was riding atop.

Extended out from the body was a malevolent head. And resting in that head was a pair of eyes burning with hellfire.

The creature’s identity was that of a massive, winged hound, and Vlad was mounted elegantly atop its back.

They fit together so well, it seemed almost as though each had been born to pair with the other.

“You sure took your sweet time.”

Kaito let out a low murmur. Vlad deepened his unpleasant smile.

The current Vlad was nothing more than an inferior replica. However, in addition to the way he thought, he had one other forte left to him. He could

work together with the prideful Kaiser.



The Kaiser, the apex of the fourteen demons, was a beast who could test a thousand men and then devour all of them.

The trials he imposed on his contractor were harsh, and most of the candidates had died horribly. That said, though, once he'd acknowledged his partner's madness as one to his liking, he was willing to forgive slights that would otherwise have warranted tearing them limb from limb. And Vlad Le Fanu was the first man to ever earn that right.

By losing to Elisabeth and meeting a disgraceful death at her hands, Vlad had earned himself the Kaiser's wrath for quite some time. However, it was also thanks to his help that the Kaiser had been able to remanifest, and at the moment, the two of them possessed similar attributes. From an outside perspective, Vlad and the Kaiser seemed to click.

If nothing else, the supreme hound was allowing Vlad to ride atop his back.

That's another reason I gave him a body.

In Kaito's current state, he didn't need a demon to protect him. In other words, it would be more efficient to have the Kaiser fighting independently rather than acting as his escort. However, to do that, another individual was necessary. Left to his own devices, the Kaiser would refuse to act on anyone else's behalf. The temperamental hound needed a hunter to rein him in. That was Vlad's job, and the reason Kaito had given him a body.

When Kaito had done so, he'd magically set up the artificial body to allow him to observe what Vlad did and said. At the moment, he could clearly make out the wicked way Vlad's lips were curling.

Vlad was calling out affectionately to the Kaiser.

"Now then, my former companion. O proud, supreme hound. Are you ready?"

"Ha! Ready for what? This whole affair is laughably ludicrous! Telling a demon to help stop the end-time is contradictory beyond repair! The Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain must have finally gone mad."



“See, you say that, dear Kaiser, but you’re the one who agreed to fight in this war, aren’t you?”

Vlad calmly rebutted the Kaiser’s scornful words. Then he gestured with his chin toward the underling troops.

As the hideous masses of flesh ferociously charged forward, they looked as vulgar as half-finished platters of sloppily eaten food.

“I understand you, you know. You don’t retain underlings. You’re too proud a beast to bear even looking at their hideous forms. And you demons are solitary entities—unless your contractor calls on you, you cooperate with no one, even if your goals are aligned. How could you allow the world to be destroyed at the hands of not just another, but Diablo, who exists only to prepare the world for God to rebuild it, who lurks in a human’s body with neither pride nor will?”

As he whispered, Vlad stroked the black dog’s back. If he’d been in range of the Kaiser’s fangs, he would assuredly have lost his arm. Fortunately for him, though, his seat on the Kaiser’s back was out of reach. He went on in a casual tone.

“You and I were supposed to rule the world, once. But dashed as our dreams may have been, the vicissitudes of fate have led us here. And seeing one’s half-eaten meat snatched away before one’s eyes is unpleasant, no?”

“Listening to you prattle is far more unpleasant, I say. Cease your tittering; you test my patience. But your thoughts on consumption are apt.”

The Kaiser let out a deep howl. He curled up the corners of his mouth like a human.

Then, without warning, he soared through the air.

The black dog descended upon the underlings like a raptor hunting its prey. The hellfire in his eyes traced a searing trail through the air. The force of the wind would have shredded any normal person to bits, but Vlad merely snapped his fingers, unfazed.

“La (become).”

Black darkness and azure flower petals caressed the ground, and iron bear

traps began sprouting up like flowers in bloom.

They weren't nearly powerful enough to kill the underlings. However, thanks to their simple construction, they were well suited toward stopping the many-limbed fiends in their tracks. Then sure enough, the Kaiser swooped in upon the captured pack.

He descended on them, in every sense of the word.

He was like a black star, falling through the sky by divine prophecy. The darkness silently blanketed his landing point. For a moment, the area was cast into absolute silence. A few seconds later, though, the darkness transformed into black feathers, then exploded in a shower of azure petals. Starting from the explosion's center, the underlings had been eviscerated.

Tongues and genitalia crashed into the trees, then crumbled into dust.

The beast's landing alone had been enough to cause serious bloodshed, and he laughed in a voice that sounded almost human.

"Gaaaah-ha-ha-ha, baaaah-ha-ha-ha, gaaaah-ha-ha-ha.

"Those lumps of meat don't even comprehend the difference in our ranks. Why, even making me kill them is irreverent. Know your place and die already."

His proclamation was haughty and arrogant. Upon hearing it, the underlings opened their mouths. Even without brains, their instincts were telling them the hound was cut from the same cloth as they.

Countless mouths moved in unison, weaving together words of protest.

The things posed questions. (And they were lamenting, too.)

The things made a supplication. (And they were bewildered, too.)

The things begged for mercy. (And they were angry, too.)

The things—— (And then they were torn to shreds.)

"I told you, you're annoying."

The Kaiser stomped down on the nearest underling. Unable to withstand the pressure, it burst, collapsing as though its sutures had been ruptured. The Kaiser continued chomping down on several others before spitting them out in

disgust.

Despite the fact that they were trembling in primal fear, a few of the underlings bravely asked the same question.

“““Why? Why? Why, why, why, why, why, why?””” The sheer quantity of their questions caused the very air to shake.

Amid the echoes of their pitiful voice, the supreme hound made his dignified declaration.

“You lot are hideous. Annoying. And boring. Your lives don’t bear a shred of worth.”

His answer certainly wasn’t a proper justification to kill someone. But in a sense, it was more than adequate.

To a king, the fact that the common folk displeased him was more than enough reason to crush them.

“...Looks like that just about does it.”

Over on the riverbank, Kaito was finishing up his own task.

The river was already free of black and red. Instead, the water’s surface was now blanketed with silver.

The river was packed so tightly with needles that the flow of the water was no longer visible. All the underlings that had been crossing it had been run through on their sharp points. However, no small number of them had managed to escape to the shore.

However, Kaito didn’t even need to snap his fingers.

At some point, a pair of red and white maidens had taken up his flanks and were practically snuggled up to him.

One of them bore a bewitching smile, and the other held its eyes neatly closed. The beauties sported hair of gold and silver, and where one of them clad itself in an air of allure, the other bore a modest appearance. However, neither of them seemed ordinary in the slightest.

The two women—or more accurately, the two puppets—were an Iron Maiden

and a La Guillotine.

Both of them had been part of the Torture Princess's regular roster of torture and execution devices.

liiiiiiiiieeeeeeeEEEEEEEE!

If you didn't kill them, they would kill you.

That was simply their purpose.

The underlings seemed to instinctively understand the threat the two women posed. They charged toward the maidens. They all spit out venom in unison as they extended their various appendages.

That moment, the gold and silver beauties transformed. One's stomach, adorned in a red dress, opened up, and mechanical arms reached out from within. The dress adorning the other's body was white, and after it crossed its arms, it spread them out and launched rectangular blades from them.

Blood sprayed. The cuts in the chunks of flesh that tumbled to the ground were clean and sharp.

There was a kind of perverse beauty in the maidens' interwoven massacre.

The soldiers stood still in abject horror. A new type of fear filled the air, different from the sort that the underlings had inspired. However, the maidens didn't pay them the slightest heed. They just kept carrying out their slaughter.

The black hound continued his macabre dance unabated as well. Vlad, still sitting atop his back, nodded with a strange sense of satisfaction.

"You know, I only just realized it myself, but isn't this our first time working together as father and son?"

"That is...not how I'd describe it."

Kaito offered a quick retort, unconsciously breaking the silence.

The Kaiser closed his jaw. The red maiden gently rubbed its womb. The white maiden closed its arms, as though in prayer.

It was over.

All that was left were scraps of flesh.

“...He’s a monster.”

Someone quietly murmured, practically spitting out the words.

Kaito Sena offered no response.

As far the World Tree’s defensive line was concerned, the fourth wave had been successfully eradicated.



“Looks like the wounded got back safely, and the shift change went down without a hitch, so... Good work; I’m out!”

“This is just a supposition, my dear successor, but is this what you’ve been doing this whole time?”

As Kaito was waving good-bye, Vlad called out to him.

Kaito blinked a few times. Then he delayed the teleportation circle’s activation and turned to face Vlad.

All around them, the war front was being rearranged. The wounded were being split between the infirmaries at the World Tree and the Capital, and at Kaito’s direction, they’d put in a request for more people who could help transport the injured and provide backup. Even without reinforcements, though, Vlad and the Kaiser should be able to hold the line on their own. Although he wanted to make his next stop as soon as possible, Kaito replied to the question with a nod.

For some reason, that prompted a heavy sigh from Vlad, who also gave his shoulders a light shrug.

“Well, I suppose it’s a sensible decision. Right now, you’re wanted most for your powers as a living weapon. Traveling to the various fronts is no doubt the best way for you to meet expectations. Still, that aside...”

“That aside... What?”

“...No, perhaps I’d best stop there. It’s not something fit to say with a straight face. Forget I said anything.”

“I dunno if this is some sort of weird bashfulness or if you’re trying to be considerate, but either way, you’re creeping me out.”

“Heh, my successor and king’s rebellious phase grows ever longer. Actually, given our relationship, is *rebellious phase* even the right phrase to use? I have to say, I’m not sure myself.”

The question was of no importance whatsoever, but Vlad began seriously turning it over in his mind.

Kaito narrowed his eyes as he retrieved his glass orb from his pocket. This time, he dropped it for real. A blue design began etching itself atop the bloodstained ground. A great mass of petals and darkness rushed up.

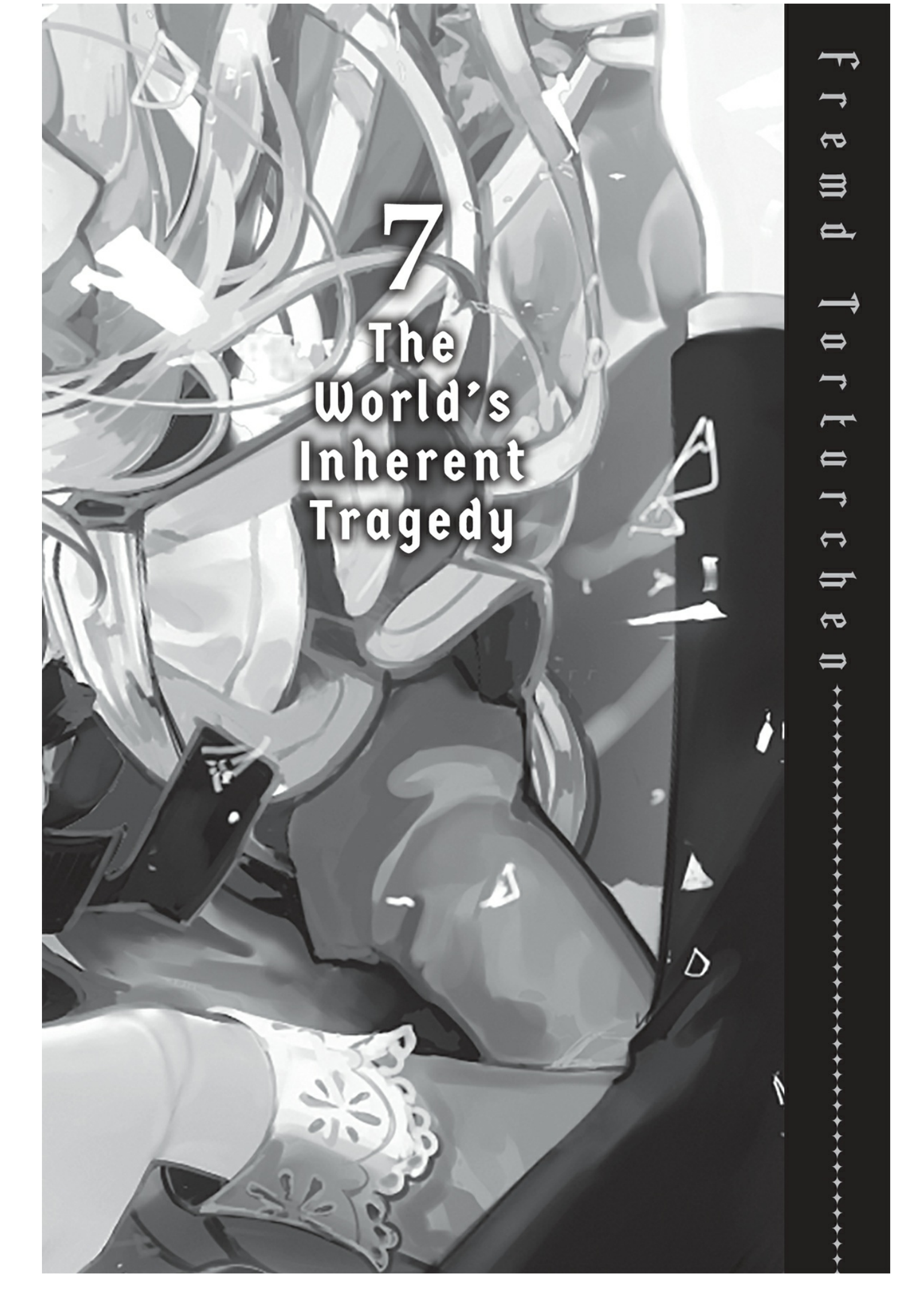
Then the azure hardened into a cylinder.

From the other side, Vlad’s laughter-filled voice rang out.

“It’s just... The way you are now, you remind me of a dying beast prowling the land.”

Well, he was right about one thing.

It wasn’t something one could say with a straight face.

A black and white photograph of a car crash scene. A car is heavily damaged, with its front end crumpled and debris scattered. A large, stylized number '7' is overlaid on the image, positioned above the title text. The title text is in a serif font, with the word 'The' in a smaller size than the others. The background shows the interior of the car and the surrounding area, with a person's leg and foot visible in the lower left corner.

7 The World's Inherent Tragedy

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

7

The World's Inherent Tragedy

After the pain caused him to die of shock yet again, Kaito Sena got to thinking. Specifically, it was during the blank time right after he'd resuscitated, before his consciousness sorted itself out.

Hypothetically, if Elisabeth hadn't summoned me, what would have become of me?

He certainly wouldn't have had to repeatedly experience the pain of death. He wouldn't have seen all those horrible, gruesome sights, either. However, he also would have gone his whole life without ever feeling glad to be alive.

Then like an empty bowl being filled with water—
—memories of the various things he'd experienced in this new world swirled within his mind.

The Torture Princess, laughing innocently. And at times, standing alone atop the battlefield without so much as a tear in her eye.

Hina, smiling gently. And in her reddened wedding dress, holding her halberd at the ready.

The Butcher. Izabella. Jeanne. Lute. Ain. Vyade.

All the people he'd met, all the expressions they'd made, and all the things they'd said to him.

And Neue. The boy who'd protected Kaito during the Earl's hellish game and been eaten alive by a spider. Kaito hadn't forgotten the words Neue had said to him as he'd stood on death's door.

"I guess...I was just hoping you could find happiness in this world."

Even now, I'm still not totally sure what happiness is supposed to look like. But

there's one thing I do know.

The first time he'd wept with joy at having been born—
—his death had gained meaning for the very first time.

And even if he'd ended up taking on the same curse the Butcher had been bound by—

—no matter how foolish the decision was, Kaito didn't regret it at all.

He had no regrets.

And because of that, I—

"...to. Sir Kaito. Sir Kaito!"

Then upon being forcefully called, Kaito opened his eyes. Once again, his thoughts had been cut off and swallowed up by the darkness.

He shook his head a little, then looked up. A paladin clad in silver armor, which had atop it a coat of arms featuring a white lily, was standing before him. Behind the man's rugged shoulders, Kaito could make out stars scattered across the night sky.

Kaito reflexively narrowed his eyes.

This long, precious day was finally coming to an end.

At the moment, he was lying toppled over in an empty lot in the region that had been severely damaged by the Grand King's plot. He slowly shifted his vision from the skies to the area around him. When he did, the glint of blades came into view.

A number of paladins were surrounding him.

And their swords were all leveled in his direction.



"Oh, this is... I mean, I get it, but..."

Not acting timidly in the slightest, Kaito heaved himself upright. The weapons drew a hair closer as a warning. Kaito completely ignored them, instead checking to see who the people surrounding him were. Their helmets' visors

were down. It was impossible to tell whether or not any of them had fought alongside him back when the mass of flesh had invaded.

Kaito recalled the series of calamities that had befallen the Capital.

Once, thanks to a plot hatched by the Grand King Fiore, the Capital had come under attack by three demons who had fused together. The death count had been high, and countless historic buildings had been destroyed. The massive town market had been leveled, as had a number of workshops and warehouses, not to mention all the teleportation devices, communication devices, and other resources that had been lost. The monetary damages were incalculable. And the influx of refugees from the Capital was causing financial strain across the land. The number of able-bodied workers had declined, and certain types of food supplies were dwindling.

That was the earlier incident.

Now, thanks to the formation of the Diablo pillar, mankind had been dealt yet another grave blow.

And to make matters worse, it had been proven that the culprits behind the world ending were none other than the Church's reconstruction sect. A group that'd placed their blind faith in God and the Saint had taken advantage of the chaos of Godd Deos's death and blown the horn of ruin.

At this point, there was no value in trying to hide the truth. Thanks to Lute's testimony, all three races knew about the Church's plot. However, this truth had not been formally announced to the people yet. Even so, the rumors about the God pillar had circulated alongside information about the Diablo pillar, leading to the collapse of humanity's long-standing religious doctrine.

In other words, the paladins' very reason to exist had been rocked down to its foundations.

With that in mind, it'd be unreasonable to expect their judgment to be completely clear.

Furthermore, by all rights, the Mad King—who was the Kaiser's contractor, and who possessed the Torture Princess's heart and an immortal body—should have been the paladins' enemy. But because he'd received the support of La

Christoph, who both spearheaded the moderate sect and acted as the saints' mediator, as well as that of several prominent aristocrats, they had no choice but to follow his orders.

However, that notwithstanding, given that he'd teleported without advance notice to an abandoned plot of land that had been ravaged by a demon, it was only natural that their swords would find their way into his face.

Kaito could appreciate how they felt. He even sympathized. On the other hand, he found it exasperating.

Their insubordination is too half-assed. If the sheep think the shepherd's making the wrong decisions, then they shouldn't have started following him in the first place. If everyone had just taken a minute to think and act on their own, then the world wouldn't be ending right now.

Kaito shrugged. Unfortunately, though, they clearly took that as instigation.

Perhaps it had touched a nerve, as one of the paladins wrung a deep voice from his throat.

"Sir Kaito Sena. You didn't inform us in advance that you'd be visiting at this late hour. What business do you have?"

"So is it a good thing that you're asking me, or is this even more half-assed?"

"Answer the question, if you would!"

An angry shout tore through the air. The wording was one thing, but its tone sounded pretty close to an order.

Kaito was about to answer truthfully, but then at the last minute, he closed his mouth. He gazed off into the distance. The buildings had been engulfed by a demon, rendering the earth strangely smooth, and he could see a silver light approaching. As it drew closer, it left faint glitters in its wake, like a shooting star. However, the paladins still hadn't noticed it yet.

"What, giving us the silent—?"

As another paladin was about to angrily cry out, all their weapons suddenly went flying. Someone had carefully knocked them into the air by kneeling their hilts. The swords, unbroken, plunged blade-first into the deserted patches of

earth.

The sharp, insectoid legs left silver afterimages in the air as the newcomer moved about. Whoever it was, they'd arced to an abrupt stop.

"What do you all think you're doing?!"

"Cap...Captain!"

The woman was leveling a sharp glare at the paladins. She was down on all fours with her back arched, her stance that of a menacing beast. Her mismatched blue and purple eyes and long, silver hair gleamed in the pale light.

Her face still had the vestiges of its former beauty. Now, though, her entire body was so distorted, it would make one hesitate to even describe her as human. More than half her body was completely devoid of flesh.

Moving in its place were strange mechanical parts, the likes of which would have been out of place even in Kaito's world.



Gears were spinning in sections of her cheek, and screws were rising and falling within the parts of her wrists and ankles that were peeking out from her uniform.

They clearly differed from normal artificial limbs and body enhancements. Not even Kaito's world would have been able to manufacture such a thing. The fact that technology wasn't nearly as developed in this world made it seem all the more out of place. Yet at the same time, she had a strange beauty about her. That was likely thanks to her strong will, which glimmered in her eyes.

It was a powerful light, one that only existed in the eyes of the living. And her voice had pride in it befitting that light.

"That man you were pointing your swords at—Sir Kaito Sena—saved my life! And he's fighting alongside us to prevent the world from ending! How many times do I have to tell you that before it gets through those heads of yours?!"

"B-but Captain Vicker, ma'am! With all due respect, as paladins, placing our unconditional faith in the Kaiser's contractor, not to mention the man with the Torture Princess's heart, is too—"

“Fools! The reluctance you’re feeling is baseless and emotional! If that’s the only reason you have for your actions, then cast it aside! Perhaps you’ve forgotten they’re the ones who rescued us in the battle at the Capital!”

“We haven’t forgotten, I swear! But Captain, surely you understand how we feel. His powers are far too perverse. Even some of the Church leadership was saying he’s our enemy. Why, then, would you have us believe in him?!”

The paladin gave a pained appeal. Despite the fact that he himself was the subject of their mistrust, Kaito nodded in sympathy.

The first demon had been stored away in the Capital’s underground tomb. The paladins’ reality had been shattered in the cruelest way possible. He could hardly blame them for having their doubts. At the moment, they probably felt like they were adrift in the darkness. However, the woman’s clear words cleaved through their hesitation.

“Our faith is just—never let yourself doubt that! No matter what truths the Church may have been hiding, the nobility shown in acting with purity, doing good deeds for the sake of our neighbors, and conducting our lives with prayer on our lips will never change! Thus, it is our duty to be examples of that justice! And in order to do that, we need to devote our full efforts to protecting the innocent!”

“Captain Vicker... Even after having your body changed like that, you still...”

Several of the paladins clenched their fists. They cast their gazes down. When they looked back up, though, some of their hesitation had cleared up, and their stagnant moods had started to shift. Noticing that, the woman pressed on.

“I have nothing more to say. Ian, Leauvas, what happened to keeping watch? Dan, weren’t you supposed to relieve the people guarding the ration line? Bran, did you intend on sending the bishops back without an escort? All of you, return to your posts!”

“Yes, ma’am. My apologies. It won’t happen again!”

The paladins placed their arms over their chests and bowed. Then they hurried back to their posts. None of them turned to look back. The doubts they’d been seized by just a moment ago seemed to have vanished without a

trace. Their decisive retreating made fully clear just how much trust and respect they put in their captain.

Before long, they were all gone.

The woman gave her head a small shake. Her silver hair fluttered as the tension drained from her body.

“Well then. My apologies for the discourtesy of my men.”

The woman slowly stood up and straightened her back. The parts in her ankles she’d been using when she traveled wound down with a loud noise and stowed themselves. After giving her back a firm *thump*, she turned back to look at Kaito again.

“You did well to make it to the Capital, Sir Kaito.”

“Yeah. I’m glad to see you’re doing all right, Izabella.”

Kaito answered her familiar greeting in kind. She nodded.

Just a few days ago, the very Church she’d put her faith in had forced her to consume demon flesh. As a result, she’d fallen into a state that had been harder to undo than even death. However, the golden Torture Princess, Jeanne de Rais, had reinforced her body with Deus Ex Machina and saved her life.

She tried frantically to raise the corners of her mouth. The gears in her left cheek whirred loudly, and her metal parts moved in accordance with her will. However, it was undeniable how artificial her bare, mechanical smile looked.



*

Yet even so, Izabella Vicker was beautiful.



“As for your wife, she was aiding in the defense efforts earlier, and she’s currently making the rounds. When the fourth wave attacked what used to be Mage’s Row, she exterminated them practically on her own. It was quite the splendid display.”

“Oh yeah, I already knew about that thing with Hina. That was some sick fighting.”

“You knew? Well, be that as it may, are you not worried that the two of you are fighting separately?”

Izabella’s voice sounded concerned. Its gentle tone echoed through the darkness.

As he climbed the ladder, Kaito answered her question, which had come from overhead.

“All I can do is throw around magic. Of the two of us, Hina’s way better in battle. There’s no way some underlings from the fourth wave are gonna be able to hold her up. Man, my wife’s the coolest, isn’t she?”

“Fine words of praise. Cuteness is far from the only appeal women can have.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, she’s cute, too! *Really* cute!”

“Quite. Even I can tell how unmistakably charming she is. Later, you should make sure you tell that to her directly. I’m sure she’d be pleased— Hmm? Wasn’t it around here?”

At the moment, the two of them were lined up vertically in a cramped space. Stretching out her arm, Izabella fumbled around overhead. Eventually, her metal fingers brushed against the wooden door, and she pushed it open. A square section of the night sky appeared amid the darkness.

Izabella then went up through the door. Kaito, too, made his way to the top of the ladder and stuck his head out into the night. His cheeks were met by a chilly wind. He placed his hands on the stone floor, then lifted himself to his feet.

When he looked up at the sky again, he realized the stars were closer than they had been earlier. However, the moon wasn't visible. Faint, dark clouds were covering patches of the sky. Because of that, it was difficult to look around.

The two of them were standing atop a watchtower beside the castle ramparts. It had suffered serious damages, so it was currently sitting unused.

Alongside Izabella, Kaito approached the tower's edge. As he gazed out over the Capital, which was blanketed in night, he frowned.

"...Man, that's grim."

"You can see it without binoculars, even in this darkness?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah. I had to teach myself how, but I fiddled with my eyes a bit."

"...I suppose we've both made sacrifices."

"Sure, but you've had it way rougher than me, haven't you? Hmm... When you consider how long it's gonna take to clear away all the rubble, restoring the Capital's gonna be rough. Most of the buildings you'd want to restore are completely leveled. It might just be easier to construct everything from the ground up. Although, I guess compared with the last disaster, even this looks salvageable."

Kaito let out a heavy sigh. The Capital still bore the cruel scars from the destruction the three demons had wreaked. Now even more damage had been piled atop it. A fire had broken out in the chaos of the underlings' attack, and the mages in charge of extinguishing such fires hadn't been able to stop it in time. In order to keep it from spreading, they'd had to knock down a huge number of buildings. But even though they'd resorted to such drastic measures, the area that had gotten scorched was considerable. Conversely, because some aqueducts had ruptured and several bridges had also collapsed, parts of the Capital had been submerged.

No matter where he looked, he saw figures that were undoubtedly corpses. Frighteningly, even some of the buildings that seemed to have been knocked down on purpose had human arms sticking out from underneath.

...Man, just how long is it gonna take to recover all those corpses and identify

them? Even if they decide to just burn them all because it's an emergency, there's a good chance that an epidemic will break out before they finish.

Next, Kaito turned his gaze toward the large-scale shelter. This time, it wasn't scattered throughout the various plazas. Instead, the people were all gathered together in a vacant lot left over from the three demons' attack. Thanks to that, the paladins and priests were able to mount a much firmer defense. Because the saints were all absent, some mages had called forth summoned beasts, and their massive figures could be seen patrolling the area. Furthermore, one of the Church's undamaged buildings had been opened up to the public as an infirmary. At the moment, they were hard at work passing out rations.

After his verifying all that, Kaito raised an eyebrow.

...What's that?

Here and there amid the collapsed houses, he could see lights flickering.

Apparently, there were more people than he'd expected who hadn't taken shelter. He could imagine any number of reasons for that—perhaps they didn't want to leave the familiarity of their homes, or perhaps they didn't trust the Church in the wake of the God pillar being erected. However, there was something eerie about them that made goose bumps run across his skin.

Upon closer inspection, the people clustered around the fires that had been lit amid the debris seemed oddly tense.

Something was off. Trusting his instincts, Kaito quietly asked Izabella about it.

“Hey, there's a bunch of people who don't look like they're heading for the shelter. What's up with them?”

“...In truth, that was something I needed to talk to you about.”

“Well, that's ominous. Why do you sound so serious?”

“Everyone has their own reasons for not going to the shelter. Many of them probably just don't want to bear the psychological strain of staying somewhere they're not used to... However, there are also those among them who fear the masses, and others who are carrying out a plot.”

“People who fear the masses? Carrying out a plot?”

Deep wrinkles etched themselves into Kaito's brow. It sounded like the former viewed the masses as somehow dangerous, and the latter were committing some sort of crime. Izabella gave him a short nod. Then she elaborated: "Deplorably, the damages didn't just arise at the Capital. In fact, the number of incidents here were probably on the lower side. Humanity comprises about eighty percent of the Capital's population. The farther north you go, and the poorer the towns and villages get, the higher the number of mixed-race demi-humans and beastfolk. If you include all the unreported cases from up there, the incident is more than grave enough to carve a dark page in our history books."

"Your preface is too long. Just tell me what happened."

"...You really are just like Elisabeth."

"Please."

"Mixed-race demi-humans and beastfolk were massacred."

A cold, heavy wind blew between the two of them.

Kaito shut his mouth tight. Izabella stopped talking as well. Kaito silently turned to look back at the distant, wavering flames and the corpses scattered about. Then he slowly wrung a quiet voice out from his throat.

"...You're saying with all these underlings running about and killing people, people started killing their own kind?"

"Tragically, yes."

"Why? There's no reason. No, even if it doesn't make sense, there must be a reason. What is it?"

Kaito's voice was threatening as he posed his question. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Izabella's silver hair wave gently. When he looked, he saw she, too, had turned her gaze to the fires blazing in the night. He squeezed his fists tight.

A man-made massacre.

Even if it had some connection to the Diablo pillar, it was still a tragedy that defied comprehension.

To put it simply, it's something we absolutely can't allow.

"The cause of it all was the desire for salvation."

"Salvation? How is salvation related to a massacre?"

"It only became evident after La Christoph's investigation, but many of the most fanatical members of the reconstruction sect, as well as those who held leadership positions, asked to be transferred out to the countryside at about the same time they started using the transfigured paladins to conduct the beastfolk murders. Then they fled. And at the same time, rumors about the rebuilding began springing up."

"What kind of rumors?"

"Allegedly, 'Hark, O ye ignorant faithful. Pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand,' 'The end-time is nigh,' and 'After the rebuilding, the devout faithful will be led into the new world.' And now right on schedule, the end-time truly is upon us."

"The reconstruction sect won't actually be saved, obviously."

Kaito spat out the words. Faithful or not, everyone's fate would be the same. Death. At the same time, he understood. To anyone who'd heard the misinformation ahead of time, it would seem as though the prophecy had been fulfilled. The miracle had occurred. And only the chosen ones would be saved.

"However, the people who believed in that false salvation began massacring mixed-bloods."

"But why? I don't understand how the two are connec— No, wait. Don't tell me... No! That's so fucking stupid!"

"I see you figured it out. That's right—they were killing heretics."

Izabella laid out the horrible truth. Her voice was as cold as ice. Kaito sighed and buried his face in his hands.

To be precise, the beastfolk and demi-humans weren't even heretics. The Three Kings of the Forest and the Sand Queen they revered had all been created by the Saint during the last rebuilding. Their origins were the same. But from the perspective of the Church's believers, the divergent beliefs among the

various races must have made them look like they were completely different.

And to be even more precise, they probably wanted to treat the other races as heretics so they could use them as that.

What was “that”?

Kaito lifted his face up from his palms. Then he quietly voiced his dreadful hypothesis.

“...To use them as sacrifices?”

“Yes. They were killing heretics so they could sacrifice them and prove their devotion to God.”

Izabella affirmed his suspicions. Kaito shook his head. There was no word to describe those believers’ actions but *foolish*. After all, it had been meaningless. The Church’s teachings didn’t even mention sacrifices being necessary in the first place. But when faced with chaos and the fear of dying, people were liable to reach out for the simplest, cruelest methods available to them.

Her voice still frigid, Izabella elaborated on her statement.

“The only people who could state with confidence they’d be led into the new world were those who were truly pious. But the end-time actually came. So in order to be saved, people felt they had to immediately start demonstrating to God how devout they truly were. Sacrificing others was a nice, easy-to-measure method.”

“So they said, *kill those who don’t believe in God*. But in truth, they did it because of how guilty they felt for not believing hard enough themselves, and because of how afraid they were that they wouldn’t be saved, huh... It all sounds like some kind of sick joke.”

“That it does. Other than the few successful businessmen, most of the mixed-race people had no means of self-defense. The demi-humans think blood purity is king. They would never protect those of mixed race. Because of all the chaos, the beastfolk couldn’t muster a response. And we had our hands full with the underlings. In short, they had no way to protect themselves, and nowhere to run.”

Kaito bit down hard on his lip. Several drops of blood ran down his thin jaw.

Once more, he was being forced to confront a cruel reality that he'd thought he understood.

He couldn't save everyone. Still, though...

...These deaths are pointless. There's no good reason for them!

Kaito Sena howled internally. Religious conflicts existed even back in his old world. There was no shortage of examples where people carried out racial genocides in times of war, too. Just as people were capable of putting their lives on the line to protect others, they were just as capable of killing one another like insects. Despite possessing reason, they often acted like animals. Kaito was well aware of that contradiction. But right now, being confronted with that fact felt like he was getting his entrails scooped out with a knife.

At that very moment, there were people in the world sacrificing their sanity in order to fight on everyone else's behalf.

And on the other hand, there were people willing to massacre the innocent simply because they wanted to be saved.

If that was the case, then at the end of the day...

As far as salvation goes...

"In the end, as far as salvation goes, is ours truly right?"

Izabella's soft murmur overlapped with Kaito's doubts. He raised his head and looked her way. She was gazing out over the Capital with a pained expression on her face. Her words were practically a soliloquy.

"Our salvation and the salvation the reconstruction sect aims for are divergent. And even within the reconstruction sect, the Grave Keeper's zealotry was different still. When she spoke, it was with unwavering pride and conviction. She described the world to come as *'God's kingdom, a perfect, ideal land.'* *'All glory to God.'* *'The miracle is upon us.'*"

"'There is no need for us here,' huh."

Taking over for Izabella, Kaito completed the Grave Keeper's quote. Then he closed his eyes.

In the darkness, he could picture that young girl, clad from head to toe in scarlet, smiling. There hadn't been so much as a sliver of hesitation in those rich-amber eyes of hers. They were so beautiful that Kaito felt as though they'd suck him in, and he had to shake his head to rid himself of the image.

Izabella quietly exhaled, then continued her confession.

"Allow me to speak candidly. When I first heard about the massacres, I stopped being so confident that the Grave Keeper had been wrong. Before the conditions for rebuilding are met, Elisabeth's body is going to break. With its contractor gone, Diablo will be released. Then while God is yet unable to act, Diablo will destroy its pillar and return all creation to nothingness. The rebuilding will not come to pass. But in reality, that's only true as far as we're concerned. It's perfectly reasonable to think that, even with His contractor destroyed, God will rebuild a new world atop the blank slate. And mankind will have no involvement in the process. A rebuilding with no one wielding the brush. At the end of it all, the new world will probably be completely different from this one, but...maybe that's for the best."

"Izabella..."

"There is no need for us here."

Izabella quickly recited back the Grave Keeper's words. She gently closed her eyes.

There was no anger in her voice. Merely a deep, pervasive sadness.

"Given our situation, I find it hard to refute the Grave Keeper's sayings."

Kaito Sena narrowed his eyes. He responded with mere silence.

The weakness in her words was unlike Izabella. All the same, however, it was more like her than anything else.

After all, Izabella Vicker believes in humanity.

Even after having her body corrupted and being driven to the brink of death, she hadn't resented a soul. But the fact that she believed they were worth saving was precisely why she lamented the cruelty and weakness possessed by all of humanity, not just a few fanatics.

Just like that woman who, long, long ago, had tried to save everyone—
—Izabella had been disappointed in exactly the same way.



Kaito thought back to a question he'd once been asked. It was a question that he, too, had asked himself no small number of times.

Flocks of sheep are, fundamentally, stupid. But at the end of that day, is that truly not a sin?

The ignorant had no right to cast blame, did they not?

If that was the case, then didn't that make their entire way of life fundamentally wrong?

Kaito slowly closed his eyes, then reminisced on all the various horrors he'd seen.

In a sense, the people living in this world deserved all the tragedies that had befallen them. They had brought these terrors upon themselves. After all, the seed of evil strewn in it had only bloomed out of the disappointment of the woman who'd sacrificed herself.

The moment the fourteen demons showed up, it was obvious that something needed to be done about them or the world would suffer a crippling blow. But even though everyone knew that, no one actually tried to do anything.

No one except for one peerless sinner. The Torture Princess.

And that was how the world had reached the here and now.

Hallelujah—that single word the Grave Keeper had said rattled about in Kaito's eardrums. He shook his head, then opened his eyes.

Still silent, he turned back toward Izabella. The cold night bore down on her as she began speaking again.

"Here I was, telling my men not to waver, and now look at me. How utterly pathetic. But even if we overcome this challenge, the world is too steeped in malice. With all the animosity and fear the people will bear, I have no faith we'll be able to keep on living like normal."

“Izabella...”

“If we’re headed for ruin one way or the other, wouldn’t it be best to welcome in a new world? I just can’t get that thought out of my head. We’re fighting so hard to save this world, but...”

...Was their salvation truly the right one?

She posed the question earnestly to the Mad King, the man who fought while shouldering everything on his back.

It was a sincere question, the kind that a child might ask.

Kaito took it head-on. His shoulders, clad in his black, military-like uniform as they were, were frail and weak. His growth had been stunted. Now, though, those same shoulders bore the weight of everything he’d inherited from the Torture Princess.

It was a heavy burden. Yet the Mad King gave his answer without having to think it over much at all.

“Right, wrong, none of that matters.”

Izabella’s eyes twitched as she narrowed them. One of them was surrounded by machine parts, and it moved ever so slightly slower than the other.

Then she stared straight at Kaito, as though trying to figure out what he meant.

Kaito placed his hands on the watchtower’s ramparts, then leaned forward a little. He gazed out over the marred Capital. Among the corpses dotting the land, not all of them had met their ends at the underlings’ hands.

Kaito Sena knew. The world wasn’t beautiful.

It was as filthy as a swamp, and as hideous as a rotting flower.

But in it, I found something truly radiant.

This was the only place that he and the people precious to him existed.

Even if, perhaps, anything and everything about it was wrong, that fact remained.

“What meaning does some imaginary person’s happiness have? Does it

matter if some world we've never heard of is peaceful? Even if hell is the only thing left for us, I still want the people I know to fight back. And someday, I want them to find happiness."

Every single person was worthy of finding happiness.

Everyone had that right.

Even if the world had already become hell on earth.

And no matter how foolish the living all were.

Just as he yearned for the ruthless, gentle Torture Princess— —so, too, did Kaito Sena forgive the world for its contradictions, loving it for them instead.

"That's why I'm going to protect them."

The Mad King made his declaration without wavering for a moment. He then looked back at Izabella, his eyes so free of hesitation that they seemed almost crazed. She squinted. She looked as though she was gazing at something dazzling. Eventually, she placed her arm horizontally over her chest and bowed.

Her next words were quiet, practically a prayer.

"Kaito, I have nothing but thanks for you being who you are."

Not *Sir Kaito*, but just *Kaito*. Her words were packed with a much deeper intimacy than usual.

Kaito cast a gentle gaze at her mechanically supplemented body. Then he, too, spoke softly.

"I should be the one thanking you."

"Hmm? For what?"

"No, I just... The world definitely needs people like you."

"...Like me? I should hardly think so. All I seem able to do is complain and dither."

"Not at all. After this, the world's gonna need people like you way more than people like me."

Izabella frowned. Then puzzled, she opened her mouth. In all likelihood, she

was about to try to put the sense of unease she'd just felt into words somehow. However, Kaito held up his hand and cut her off.

He scratched his head through his faded-brown hair, then abruptly changed the subject.

"So, uh, on that note. I feel kinda bad for saying something so casual after seeing just how bad the situation is, but...I guess that's also the reason I had something I wanted to ask of you."

"If it's within my power to grant, then ask away."

She cocked her head to the side, wondering what it was that he wanted. Kaito briefly cleared his throat. However, hesitating wasn't going to get him anywhere. "So here's the thing," he began.

Then with utmost seriousness, Kaito made his request.



A few hours later, Kaito had arrived at what had once been Mage's Row.

Technically, the Row itself was still fine. However, upon determining that it was no longer possible to do business there as befitting its name, the mages put out a notice: Regardless of whether or not the world was actually going to end, Mage's Row was shutting down.

Kaito stood still atop the narrow, alley-like main drag. After surveying his surroundings, he gave a small nod.

"Huh... You really can tell the fourth-wave underlings hit this area."

The artificial, boxy buildings around him seemed to intentionally spurn the notion of decoration. The entire sector was seedy. Normally, color would be all but out of place here. Now, though, it was dyed with ominous patches of black and red, and the walls had been transformed into some unidentifiable material so the underlings would have an easier time scaling them. They must have been crawling about on the shops' surfaces, none of which had had been built with windows or doors in an effort to keep out those who didn't understand the value and danger of the goods sold within. The viciously rent corpses of the underlings littered the walls.

However, what was surprising was that the demise of Mage's Row had nothing to do with the grim spectacle before him.

Everything happened shortly after the three merged demons had been successfully struck down. First, the magical merchants quickly made their way back to the Capital. After all, while their operations had been on standby, the market price of magical remedies had exploded. Of course, their trade dealt with a wide variety of dangerous goods by nature, so they were used to being tossed about by the fickle whims of the times. However, none of them could have predicted that the very moment they hung their BACK IN BUSINESS signs up, the bugles heralding the end-time would be blown.

As a result, the merchants flipped out.

If the end-time came, then all the people in the world would die. In other words, *they wouldn't have any more customers*. And they clearly refused to stand for that. If they'd thought about the situation a little more carefully, they probably would have realized their own deaths should have been the more pressing concern. But alas. In any case, they'd all taken their strange philosophy and offered their help in the defense efforts.

Because of this, many of the veterans with summoned beasts in tow were actually powerful retirees from Mage's Row. To them, though, spending all their inventory in battle would mean having to close up shop. Preserving their precious goods and manufacturing magical remedies required quantities of mana that had taken them years to amass. Using this mana up would leave them no choice but to abandon the Capital, set up a workshop, and begin building it up again. But even knowing their actions would drive their own businesses to ruin, they still chose to strive for a world in which commerce was possible.

"All for you, my dear customers."

Those were the words of the merchant of legend, passed down for countless years.

Anyone who dealt with trade knew and held them as a badge of honor.

Maybe their choice was contradictory, but in a way, it was kind of a happy one, too.

Upon reaching that point in his thoughts, Kaito reminisced on the Butcher's nonsensical behavior. He didn't pick up the way he acted and spoke from the Saint, nor did he learn from her his way of thinking as a merchant. Perhaps he'd picked them up while unifying the scattered peddlers in his efforts to make society prosper. And now that time had gone by, the Butcher's words were still living on in the merchants' hearts.

Even if someone dies, as long as the world is still there, a part of them lives on.

And if something was worth being passed on, then it deserved to be protected.

Once again, Kaito appreciated the value of fighting back against the impossible. Suddenly, though, he was pulled from his reverie.

"Ma-Ma-Ma-Ma-Ma-Ma-Ma-Maaaaa—!"

"Mamam?"

"Master Kaitooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

And with a great *whoosh*, a maid came bursting through the air.

Or to put it another way, his wife came flying at him.

His wife—

—came flying—

—at him!

You've gotta be kidding me.

On the spur of the moment, Kaito used magic to reinforce his body, a feat only made possible by the power of love. Then he spread out his arms, ready to catch her. Upon seeing that, though, she suddenly cast aside the halberd she'd been carrying.

The weapon drew an arc through the air as it went flying off in another direction. Using the recoil from the throw, she made three and a half clean revolutions in the air and corrected her course. And just like that, she plunged headfirst into a nearby shop.

Fragments from the wall sprinkled to the ground. Kaito nervously surveyed

the damages.

Her bottom, clad in the skirt of her maid uniform, was sticking out from the wall. Kaito turned and began speaking to it.

“H-Hina? Why exactly did you go and self-destruct there?”

“I’m afraid to admit I got a little too energetic. I was concerned I would hurt you. Oh, I was just ever so excited to see you. My deepest apologies.”

“Well, that’s dumb. Here I was, more than happy to catch you.”

“Oh, Master Kaitoooooooo, you’re too kiiiiiiiind! Everyone, come look, everyone in the whole wide world! This man here is my strong, invincible, perfect, adorable husband! Eek!”

In concert with the “eek!” bit, Hina wrenched her head free from the wall. As she did, she turned about and flashed Kaito an ear-to-ear smile. After his brain finished rebooting, he came to the happy conclusion that she wasn’t injured before going on.

“You know, Hina, I was actually walking around hoping I’d find you. Thanks for coming and finding me, instead.”

“Of course! The moment I sensed your fragrant aroma, I lost myself in it and came flying right over!”

“All right, I’m gonna be honest with you; I’m a little embarrassed you could track me down by smell from that far away.”

“Oh, don’t be! You see, Master Kaito, your blood has a sweet fragrance to it, but your whole body smells warm and gentle, like the sun, or like freshly baked cookies... I mean, perhaps I’m the only one who can tell, but it’s peaceful and pleasant. It’s a lovely, lovely scent! Eek, I said it! How embarrassing!”

“Wait, *that’s* the part you’re getting embarrassed about? Anyway, Hina, there’s, uh, something I wanted to ask you.”

“What is it, my dearest Master Kaito? What is it? What is it?”

Hina’s cutely frilled skirt gently splayed out as she sat down in front of him. Her eyes glittered as she waited raptly for what he had to say. She resembled a puppy wagging its tail and was just as adorable.

Even though the world was ending, Hina was the same as ever.

Kaito let out a little chuckle. After choking back the affection welling up inside him, he knelt down, lowered his waist, and looked Hina in the eye. She blushed just like a human and began fidgeting restlessly.

“Hoo-wee, our eyes met... It’s been so long that I’m getting all shy.”

“Well, that was an odd noise. You know, Hina, it is weird that we’ve been working in different places, but we haven’t exactly been apart for all that long. Also, isn’t that a funny thing to get hung up on, given that we’ve, uh, y’know, done way more?”



“Oh, Master Kaitooooooooo, you mustn’t saaaaaaaaay that. Something terrible will happen to my gears.”

“Hmm? Something terrible?”

“Specifically, they’ll all pop out, and I will die.”

“No, don’t.”

In spite of himself, Kaito’s face went serious. Clutching her cheeks in her hands, Hina violently shook her head from side to side. In order to calm her down, Kaito stroked her head. She froze.

Kaito then rubbed his palm back and forth over the top of her maid cap. As he pampered her, he asked her a question.

“Anyway, my dear, bashful Hina, I have an invitation for you.”

“Master Kaito... Master Kaito is patting my head... Oh... If only I could keep savoring this hand for another seventy-eight hundred years... Wait, an invitation? Of what sort?”

“If you don’t mind...”

Kaito then cleared his throat in an obviously affected way. He stopped stroking Hina’s head. Instead, he reverently took her pale palm in his. She opened her emerald-green, gemstone eyes wide.

Though it was obviously too late to fret, Kaito began worrying he was trying too hard. However, Hina being Hina, he was pretty sure she wouldn’t laugh at him. And because he knew he’d already made his choice, he swallowed back his nervousness and asked:

“...would you like to go on a date with me?”

And with that, he planted an audible kiss on the tip of her finger.

She offered no response. She simply stared at him in a daze. Kaito panicked; perhaps it had been a bad idea after all. Right as he was about to explain himself, though, she opened her mouth.

“O...”

“Oh?”

“Overload.”

And with that one, enigmatic word, Hina toppled over backward.

“HINAAAAAAAAAA!” screamed Kaito.

Her face looked somehow tranquil, and at the same time, completely at peace.

Lute

A wolf beastman. He's the commanding officer of the first squad of the private army working under Vyade Ula Forstlast, a woman who in turn is the second imperial princess of the Forest King—one of the forefathers of all beastfolk. Lute has a goatwoman wife and also once invited Kaito into the beastfolk lands.



8
At the
Torture
Princess's
Castle

F r e a m d T o r t u r e h e a d

8

At the Torture Princess's Castle

A cold night wind billowed atop the watchtower, blowing the clusters of murky clouds away.

Behind them, the tranquil darkness came into view. It resembled the bottom of a clear, still lake. Izabella's silver hair and mechanical parts shone radiantly in the moonlight.

Kaito found himself reflected in her mismatched blue and purple eyes—the only parts of her body that had remained wholly unchanged.

He returned her calm gaze in kind. After a few moments of deliberation, she nodded.

“Understood. I think that's a perfectly reasonable decision. And I have no objections to your request, either. Taking the time to do so now, at this late stage, is for the best. You may not get another chance.”

“Thanks. I'm glad you see it that way.”

“But... Will you really be able to kill her?”

There was no need to ask whom she was talking about.

Wearing an expression that almost resembled a smile, Kaito elected to remain silent. Izabella no doubt understood he had no intention of answering her question. However, she continued pressing him.

“Regarding killing God and Diablo while they're still inside their contractors... I checked with Vlad, and he confirmed that Jeanne's method of bringing about salvation is still viable. Their vessels becoming unable to withstand the strain would be one thing, but if we kill them, contractors and all, the contracts will be annulled, and both God and Diablo will be forcibly returned to the realm from which they came. That's the only way we can save the world. Or if nothing else,

Diablo is the one carrying out the destruction, so we need to put it down while it's still in its vessel...that is to say, Elisabeth. But..."

Izabella cast a pained glance toward Kaito. She, too, understood.

"Elisabeth Le Fanu is deeply important to Kaito Sena." That fact would be evident to anyone who'd spent even a little bit of time around the two. Kaito didn't answer. Eventually, Izabella went on.

"I don't know if it'll help, but I have a shameful confession to make. It's one of the reasons I wavered so greatly on whether or not it was right to bring about salvation."

"...What?"

"Killing Jeanne de Rais is beyond me."

Kaito let out a small gasp. The moment he did, a harsh wind gushed up. For a moment, he felt as though he could hear a nostalgic voice nipping at his ears. Although it was lacking in emotion, it had a sweet, bell-like ring to it.

"You really are The Fool, aren't you, mister?"

Kaito thought back to the other Torture Princess, the golden girl who described herself as the saint and the whore. She'd had a certain mechanical sincerity to her actions, as well as a coldness that bordered on inhuman.

Because she'd prioritized Izabella's life over her duty to bring about salvation, she had been transformed into God's pillar.

Izabella glanced softly over the mechanical parts supplementing her own body. Originally, they'd made up Deus Ex Machina, Jeanne's living weapon.

"When I came to my senses, I was terribly confused. Why was I alive? What had happened? What had become of my body? After that, though, Ms. Ain helped calm me down, and Sir Lute explained what I'd gone through. But even then, I honestly, seriously couldn't understand it one bit!"

"Oh yeah, I don't blame you. That was some crazy shit."

"The various truths that were unveiled were heavy. However, I was able to come to terms with the Saint's thoughts and the way everything turned out. But first love... First love! In that tiny amount of time, and toward *me*! I didn't

understand it; it didn't make a lick of sense!"

"Wait, *that's* the part you had trouble believing?"

"Hmm? What else...ah. As far as my mechanical body went... True, I did sink into despair for a little while, and I even went so far as to resent Jeanne de Rais. But it turns out it's actually fairly handy; I can move around much faster now. And in any case, it was necessary in order to save my life. I quickly got used to it, and now I feel nothing but gratitude."

"Man... You don't get fazed by anything, do you?"

Kaito went all the way past admiration and landed on shock. In the battle against the three demons, Izabella's skin had torn from the inside out. But she hadn't paid any heed to the change in her physical appearance back then, either. It was downright impressive. Izabella puffed out her chest with pride. Suddenly, though, her expression grew mournful, and she looked down at her largely mechanical palms. A wistful smile spread across her face.

"And then I remembered. When we parted, the words she spoke as she kissed my hair had nothing but truth in them."

Kaito closed his eyes, then thought back.

That, too, felt like it had been over a century ago.

Back at the Capital's underground tomb, Jeanne had reached out. From an angle where their enemies couldn't see her, she'd taken a tuft of Izabella's silver hair. Then she'd planted a kiss on it, like a knight would to a princess.

Facing Izabella's dignified back, she'd whispered quietly.

*"I don't hate seeing a mere human trying to oppose them. After all, such actions are the ones that are supposed to change the world. You may be an idiot, a dunce, and a fool, miss, but I choose to believe that your actions helped delay the clock hands in their march toward the end. **You did catch my eye, and the eyes never lie.**"*

Then with slight vestiges of sorrow, she'd let go and offered her final words.

"Good-bye, my stupid, gallant little lady."

"And then Jeanne chose to save me and was made into God's pillar."

All because Izabella had been her first love.

Izabella held her hand up to the starlit night sky. Then she closed it tight, as though trying to grasp the hand of someone far away. After ten seconds or so of silence, she gave her head a small shake.

“I don’t have it in me to kill someone like that. She was so ignorant in the ways of the world; she held me when I was crying, she kissed my hair, she gave me her first love and saved me because of it... How could I possibly kill her?”

Izabella’s eyes were filled with a profound sense of sadness and anguish. Suddenly, Kaito realized: *Normally, making a confession like that would be unforgivable.*

Izabella had slaughtered countless people who’d been transformed into underlings. Saving a single life because she placed it atop the scales alone and claimed it bore weight would be unforgivable. And she, too, must have known what an act of folly that was. If nothing else, she would lose the ability to turn to the people she’d slain and boast she’d saved them. She wouldn’t be able to see herself as anything other than a simple murderer.

But even so, everyone has someone who they just can’t kill.

Someone who they’d rather gouge out their own heart than lay a hand on.

Izabella sucked in a breath, then exhaled. She quietly turned back to Kaito.

“Now let me ask you once more. Sir Kaito Sena. That is how I feel. And I imagine it’s even worse for you.”

After all, Kaito Sena was a man who would have no problems weighing Elisabeth against the world. For the sake of what he held dear, there was a very real chance he would allow the world to descend into darkness. But Izabella also believed in his virtue, and in the claim he’d once made. So for the sake of a world clutched tightly in death’s steely grasp, she earnestly, carefully asked him a question.

“You said you would save the world.”

But in order to do that, he would need to kill Elisabeth Le Fanu. Was it all one grand lie, then? Had he been deceiving everyone? Or had what he’d told them

been the unvarnished truth?

Izabella then concluded her cross-examination, as though she were handing down a final verdict.

“Can Kaito Sena kill Elisabeth Le Fanu?”



“I...”

And with that, the reminiscence ended, and Kaito opened his eyes.

He must have fallen asleep at some point.

A short while ago, he’d experienced that scene in real life, but now it was just a dream. It faded away and vanished.

At present, Kaito had already left the Capital. He rubbed his eyes and glanced at his surroundings.

He was sitting atop the stone floor and leaning against the side of a hard bed. Although it had a wood-slatted window, the room as a whole was small and cramped. Thanks to the thick, stone walls, it felt oppressive, too. The furnishings were minimal. And that only made sense. The building was constructed like a fort, with little heed paid to the comfort of its residents. And all the more so, given that he was in the servants’ quarters.

“All right then... Gluk, urk... *Well!* I wonder if Hina’s up yet?”

After surreptitiously gulping down the blood in his mouth, Kaito knelt atop the cold floor. He peered at the bed.

In the middle of its clean, white sheets lay a beautiful maid with her eyes closed.

She was curled into a ball and breathing like a child. Ever since she’d collapsed back at the Capital, she’d been operating on low functionalities. Her mana was the first thing Kaito had checked, but it was flowing normally. There wasn’t anything wrong with her.

She was just peacefully sleeping. Or to be more precise, she was replicating a human’s sleep. And while she was, she was as defenseless as a baby. In spite of himself, Kaito poked one of her white cheeks. She squirmed from side to side.

“Oh, Master Kaito... I couldn’t possibly eat any mwore...”

“Man, that’s cute. Is she dreaming or something?”

Technically, automatons weren’t equipped with the ability to dream. On occasion, though, their Self-Recording Devices would spontaneously play back one of the massive number of scenes recorded in them. They must see them in the dark sometimes; it made for a phenomenon not unlike human dreams, Kaito supposed.

In other words, automatons could dream about the people they loved. When he thought about it that way, it seemed even cuter than before. Kaito squished Hina’s cheek several more times. As she rolled about, she let out a sweet whisper.

“I told you, I can’t... I already ate all the Master Kaito I could...”

“Wait, am I the one getting eaten here?”

“Hee-hee, you’re so cute that I wanted to eat you up, Master Kaito, and you’re jusht as tasty as I expected.”

“I didn’t actually want an answer there! Hey, hey, Hina, wake up! No more scary dreams!”

“You caaah...hmwuh... Hmm? Master Kaito?”

Suddenly, Hina sprang up. Perhaps due to her surprise, the gears in her chest began audibly accelerating. She blinked and fixed her gaze on Kaito. Her cheeks instantly went flush.

“M-Master Kaito... In, um, in the one-in-a-million chance that my memories are accurate... Did you, perhaps, by any chance, possibly, say ‘date’? No, no, it must have been a dream—I’m ever so sorry!”

“I definitely do remember asking my wife on a date, actually.”

“Off to death I go.”

“Please don’t die on me with a big smile on your face like that.”

Kaito frantically propped her up before she could peacefully topple backward. He gently righted her posture. A moment later, they were facing each other

again. Hina's cheeks grew even redder.

She was about to say something, but instead, she covered her mouth in surprise. Her emerald eyes darted about. It looked like she'd finally noticed. Then she spoke, her voice trembling with astonishment and nostalgia.

"Pl-please wait just a moment! Could it be—? Are we...?"

"Yeah, I teleported us here while you were sleeping. Takes you back, huh?"

"Yes, incredibly so. It's very nostalgic. Ah, here we are. We've returned."

Hina nodded over and over. With a smile, Kaito glanced around the room once more.

In reality, it hadn't been long enough since they'd left to truly describe the place as *nostalgic*. To the two of them, though, everything felt like it had been a distant memory.

Unlike when they'd fled here from the World's End, it was silent outside. Not even the underlings' ever-present cries reached them. The quiet of the night enveloping them made it seem as though nothing had changed. But that was mere fiction. Nowhere in the world was that the case.

In truth, nothing was eternal. Until recently, this place had been crawling with underlings, too.

However, before Hina had woken up, Kaito had driven stakes into the lot of them. The silence they were currently enjoying was temporary. But Kaito chose to conceal that unromantic, troubling truth. Instead, he gently nodded.

"Yep, we're back. Back to the place where we both belong...Elisabeth's castle."

Hina laid her hands atop her chest. Overcome by a flood of emotions, she closed her eyes.

And thus, in the brief frame of time before the Diablo pillar released the fifth wave— —the two of them had left the front lines and returned to this dearly missed castle of theirs.



"So on that note, well... Normally, I would've liked to take you somewhere

more special, but the world's ending, so... Man, now that I've said it out loud, it sounds kind of scary. Anyway, I was thinking we could have a stay-at-home date. Does that sound okay?"

"That sounds delightful! Or should I say, it sounds suuuuuuper delightful!"

At Kaito's invitation, Hina began hopping up and down. Her face was filled with sincere joy. Kaito nodded, having expected she'd say that.

After all, Elisabeth's castle *was* special to the two of them. Kaito was from another world. Hina was an automaton. For the two of them, it was the only place they could call home. And that wasn't all. It was also the place where they'd met, the place where they'd spent their days, the place where they'd fought for their lives, and the place where they'd promised each other that they'd become a true family.

Countless memories were scattered about the grounds of this castle.

Thus, the two of them headed for a place one would never normally associate with a date.

"Hee-hee, this is it! Just as I suspected, this here is the most nostalgic place of them all!"

"Oh yeah, for sure. We used to spend every day in this kitchen... You handled the cooking, and I washed the dishes."

The two of them exchanged a gentle smile.

At the moment, they were in the castle's cramped, inconvenient kitchen.

It really had been a while since the two of them had come here together. Ever since the Grand King knocked Elisabeth into a coma, Kaito and Hina hadn't had a chance to cook side by side.

Hina gazed around the room fondly. Then suddenly, her eyes flashed.

"Oh my... That's—!"

Hina rushed over to a white cupboard, then eagerly opened it up.

Inside it was a neat row of little boxes. One by one, Hina removed their lids. Within them were colorful tea leaves, nuts, and dried petals. She'd assembled

them to make Elisabeth's morning beverage with.

After checking all their contents, Hina breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank goodness. They haven't gone bad. Even after we had to temporarily betray her, Lady Elisabeth left the cupboard as it was. She really is a kind person."

Hina softly wiped the corner of her eye. Kaito tried to picture what Elisabeth would say if she were to see that. She'd probably bellow, *Fool! Don't go raising your estimation of people so easily! Its mere existence slipped my mind—nothing more!* However, forgetting to dispose of what the people who'd betrayed her had left behind was, in and of itself, very Elisabeth-like.

I don't think she herself realized it, but she really did have a soft spot for her followers, especially Hina. You know, that's a form of kindness, too, Elisabeth.

As he was thinking, Kaito started walking. He opened up the ice-spirit fridge. Even with the castle's inhabitants gone, the ice spirits were still in good health. Cold air was brimming within. When the smell hit him, though, he scrunched up his face.

As he gazed over the partition board, he let out a blank murmur.

"Yeah, that makes sense... I guess this is what happens now that they're gone."

All the food inside it was thoroughly spoiled. It was only natural. There was no merchant to diligently bring fresh cuts of meat to the castle, nor was there a gourmand to gobble them right up.

At the same time, Kaito realized something.

That refrigerator was always empty. At most, it'd be full of beer and shochu.

There had also been times when it had rotten food in it, or sketchy, illegal-looking packages.

In his childhood, Kaito had occasionally been unable to withstand his hunger and had opened up the fridge. Every time he'd done so, though, he'd been beaten so harshly that he'd felt his intestines would come flying out. Sometimes, he'd even been forced to drink detergent or some unidentifiable

liquid as punishment.

It really is a happy thing, having a fridge that's always stocked with fresh food.

And if there was someone who'd happily bring you food, someone who'd delightedly prepare it, and someone who'd eat it with a smile on their face, then all the more so.

Kaito shook his head, then closed the ice-spirit fridge. Then after turning around, he tried to start walking again but immediately stopped.

Standing before him was Hina. Both her arms were behind her back. Kaito lightly called out to her.

"What's up?"

"Well, you see, Master Kaito... Ta-da!"

And with that, Hina revealed what it was she'd been hiding: hard cheese, honey sealed in wax, and a jar of nuts preserved in oil. Kaito rubbed Hina's head in praise. She cooed sweetly.

And so in the end, their dinner ended up being simple, but warm all the same.

It was no match for the feasts they'd used to have, replete with appetizers, cooked organ meat, and sweet desserts, lamented Hina. But as far as Kaito was concerned, the meal she'd concocted out of little more than love and ingenuity was beyond impressive. There were cookies baked from kneaded dough and topped with nuts, honey, and cheese, as well as a colorful salad made from garden-fresh herbs. However, when she gazed upon the completed goods, Hina shook her head once more.

"If only there had been some meat that I could have prepared as a main course. As a maid, I find it ever so mortifying."

"Not at all. This is plenty. The Butcher used to bring by fresh stuff all the time, so we never bothered to stock up on dried meat. There's no helping that."

"Mr. Butcher was oh-so-proud of that meat of his, and I really did love cooking it. It was always so lustrous and shiny, and preparing it was truly rewarding."

"...I'm sure he knew that. And I'm sure it made him real happy."

With that, Kaito stroked Hina's head. She smiled, looking to be on the verge of tears.

And soon, their dinner was ready. However, Hina didn't normally eat. Automatons were equipped with the ability to ingest food and dismantle it so they could attend banquets alongside their masters, but they didn't derive any sustenance from doing so. Rather than eating food herself, she generally preferred to watch Kaito and Elisabeth as they took their meals. Today, though, she elected to eat alongside Kaito.

They didn't eat in the dining room.

Instead, they ate before the gaping hole in the throne room's wall.

They'd laid a cloth out on the floor and lined the plates atop it. They were also utilizing the side table that Elisabeth had used so regularly. Placed on it was a bowl full of ice that Hina had half-submerged an expensive bottle of wine in.

Beside it, three glasses were laid out.

A silvery moon rested in the clear, night sky.

Elisabeth had been fond of drinking wine while basking in the moonlight. And she'd often dragged Kaito and Hina into her drinking as well. As he reminisced on that fact, Kaito poured the wine into the three glasses.

Its vivid shade of scarlet, like melted rubies, reminded him of Elisabeth's eyes.

Kaito and Hina purposefully left the throne alone and sat on the floor. They gazed up at the moon, the empty space between the two of them so distinct that it almost seemed as if someone were there. Hina held her glass in both hands as she whispered: "I hope that someday, Lady Elisabeth will be able to... No, she definitely will—"

"Yeah, to her being able to drink wine like this again."

With a *clink*, they lightly tapped their glasses together.

They then brought the fine wine to their lips, more in prayer than in thirst. Hina closed her eyes, as though she was trying to fully take in the flavor that Elisabeth had liked so much. As she did, Kaito surreptitiously snapped his fingers.

“La (fall).”

The blade Kaito had created flashed across the darkness. The underling’s head went toppling off. The cry that had been creeping up its throat vanished without a sound. Still poised as though to leap, its grotesque body toppled down into the forest below. Hina opened her eyes. The figure outside the hole was long gone. Kaito didn’t even cast a glance toward where it had fallen. With no one to interrupt them, the two of them continued their dinner.

The only thing bearing down on them was the soft moonlight.

The third glass remained full through to the end.



After they finished their dinner, the two of them washed the dishes side by side.

To anyone else, it would look like they were just doing the chores. But for Kaito and Hina, it was a perfectly natural part of their date. They engaged in a trifling conversation as they wiped down the glasses, as though imitating their normal, everyday routine.



They conscientiously returned the tableware to their shelves. Kaito stared at the plates and glasses all sitting in a line.

If worse comes to worst and nobody ever comes back here, may these, at least, remain.

With sentimentality bordering on prayer, he closed the cupboard. Elisabeth's favorite tableware all disappeared from view with a soft *click*. It almost felt as though he was drawing a curtain of sorts.

For a few seconds, he stood still. Then he let go of the handle and stretched.

"Well then... What should we do now?"

"What, indeed? It's getting quite late."

It was hardly a good time to do much of anything. And they didn't have much of it left. After discussing, they decided to head back to the servants' quarters. For whatever reason, they ended up heading for Hina's room.

She took the lead and cast the door open. Then with a broad smile, she beckoned Kaito inside.

"Please, Master Kaito, after you, after you."

"Uh, pardon the intrusion, I guess."

"Oh, by all means, welcome to my humble abode! Eek, I'm alone in my room with Master Kaito!"

Hina was thoroughly wound up. That said, it was a little late for the two of them to have such an exchange given how long they'd known each other by now.

They were, after all, a married couple, and their relationship wasn't particularly bogged down with formalities. Furthermore, Kaito had been in Hina's room a number of times before. But because it was happening in the middle of a date, the experience was strangely nerve-racking.

Kaito awkwardly stepped inside. He glanced around the room, wondering where best to sit. Thinking a chair might be nice, he turned his gaze toward the desk. Then he cocked his head to the side.

“...Huh?”

There were small bookends on top of the desk. Tomes were methodically lined up within their wooden frame. However, there was an empty space in the middle, and a book that looked like it might belong in it sitting atop the table.

It seemed altogether unnatural. Kaito called out to Hina.

“Hey, why’s that one book out of place?”

“Hmm? Oh, I could have sworn I put it away with all the others. I wonder what it’s doing out?”

Hina trotted over to the desk and scooped the book up. Now that he looked closer, Kaito felt as though he’d seen that red cover before. It was Hina’s diary. When she opened it up, her eyes went wide.

She seemed to be practically dancing as she rushed to Kaito’s side. She pointed at one of the pages in excitement.

“M-Master Kaito! Please look! Look! Look here!”

“Wait, that’s your diary, right? Is it really all right for me to read it? Wait... what?”

After peering at the spot Hina was pointing to, Kaito tilted his head to the side. Letters were scrawled across the thin sheet of paper, but the handwriting clearly wasn’t Hina’s. Upon reading the section’s contents, he widened his eyes, too.

“This...this is...”

“While Hina sleeps, I shall take it upon myself to fill out this diary in her stead.”

“I found a diary Madam Elisabeth seems to have misplaced, so I shall take it upon myself to write an entry in her place.”

“Whatever this is, I discovered it while searching the castle, so I have taken it upon myself to write its continuation.”

Kaito could tell. In the middle, the writers had started changing.

The final three pages had been written by Elisabeth, the Butcher, and Jeanne.

At some point, Hina's diary had passed through a number of different hands. And all of them had gone ahead and written entries in her place. Kaito gently stroked each of their distinctive letters.

Elisabeth. The Butcher. Jeanne.

None of the people who'd written entries were with them anymore.

Kaito turned his eyes toward the lines at the end of each page.

"Both Kaito and I are wishing for you to awaken soon."

"At the very least, I hope that my acquaintances will be able to keep on smiling for as long as possible."

"Perhaps if my little lady was here, I could have asked her about the parts that make no sense."

Each one of them had left words of concern for a different person.

Kaito shook his head, then tried to close the diary. Before he could, though, Hina reached out her arm and placed a finger between the pages to stop him. He blinked at her sudden action.

"...Hina?"

"Um, if it's all right with you... Or rather, if you're able, I have a request I'd like to make."

She gently picked up a quill pen from atop the desk. Then she gestured at the sealed inkwell beside it. Kaito could tell what she was trying to say. He took her diary in his hand.

After flipping through the pages, past the entries from all the people he knew, he arrived at a blank, white sheet behind them.

He stared at it hard.

"Me too?"

"You too, Master Kaito."

Hina bobbed her head up and down. Her tone was timid, as though she feared he'd refuse.

Kaito let out a quiet chuckle, then stepped forward. He pulled the chair out from the desk and sat down. After setting the diary on the table, he grabbed the quill and opened the inkwell.

Then he wrote his own diary entry.

Hina sat down on the bed with a relieved smile. Her manners and posture were impeccable as she waited for him to finish.

The minutes ticked softly away. The sound of scratching echoed throughout the silence.

Once, while he was writing, Kaito set the quill down. Right before he picked it back up, he gave his fingers a faint snap. A pin shot through the heart of the underling clinging to the castle's outer wall. However, Hina didn't notice.

He also stealthily swallowed down the blood gushing up from his lungs. Then he went back to writing as though nothing had happened. Eventually, he set the quill down for good. As he snapped the diary shut, he made his announcement.

"Right, all finished."

"Wow, it's complete! Excellent work! May I go ahead and read it, then?"

"Nope. The stuff I wrote's a secret."

"How can this be?!"

Upon hearing Kaito's response, Hina sprang into the air. Seemingly unwilling to give up, she got down off the bed. Then she hurriedly snatched at the diary. Kaito evaded her fingertips as he quickly rose to his feet.

Hina grunted as she stretched out her arm. She then made a frantic plea.

"But whyyy? Not being allowed to read what you're thinking, how you're feeling, how you wrote it... Why, it's so painful that the world might as well end!"

"Er, yeah, there's a real chance it's gonna end. But still, no. This isn't the kind of thing you read when the person who wrote it's still here, is it? Just read it later!"

"Master Kaito, you meanie, you bully! You're just as cool as ever!"

“Wait, why’d you compliment me at the end there? Anyway, no means no, c’mon!”

“Nnnn... But! I! Want! To! I’m going to show you more stubbornness than I ever have before!”

“Don’t go boasting about that! Seriously, cut it out!”

Hina was taller than Kaito. Due to that fact, the battle over the diary was getting heated.

The two of them paced about the room, practically dancing. From the outside, it probably looked like they were horsing around, but they were both deadly serious. Kaito cleanly evaded Hina’s feints and jumps. However, that success bred carelessness. His foot crashed into the side of the bed, and he lost his balance. That was when Hina charged.

“Hwah!”

“Eek!”

Tangled together, the two of them fell.

They tumbled down hard onto the bed.

Hina’s sleek, silver hair grazed his cheek. Her emerald eyes batted directly in front of his. Before they’d noticed, their noses had gotten so close that they were practically touching.

With a start, Hina balled up her back a little. Her voluptuous breasts pressed even harder into Kaito’s chest. She was practically squishing him, but her body was warm and soft.

Kaito instinctively thought back to the night they’d spent together in the beastfolk lands.

The diary fell from his hand. This time, neither of them made to retrieve it. It flopped onto the floor with a *thump*.

Kaito covered his face with one hand. With difficulty, he squeezed out an explanation.

“I, uh, I didn’t fall on purpose, you know.”

“Oh, I know! Er, well, I didn’t exactly fall down with you on purpose, either, but...to be quite frank, I did...press my breasts against you...on purpose... I’m very sorry.”

“That was on purpose, huh...?”

“Y-you did say you didn’t mind my being immodest, so...”

“Oh, no, I’m super happy, or, like, I feel like I should be thanking you, or... Man, I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. I’m just... Sorry.”

Kaito buried his face in his hands. Upon seeing that, Hina began gushing about how cute he was and indiscriminately planting kisses on him. Every time she moved, her soft breasts squished against him. And for a finishing blow, she moved her legs from her upturned skirt and wrapped them around Kaito’s body.

Although the feeling of her ball joints was a little disconcerting, her skin was smooth and pleasant to the touch.

As his face grew redder and redder, he peeked out at Hina from between his fingers.

Her emerald eyes were glistening sweetly. However, her face seemed somehow uneasy.

He was certain there had to be some kind of rule against making an expression like that.

“God, I just can’t!”

“Eep!”

Kaito reached out his arms and wrapped Hina in a strong embrace. She let out a thrilled cry.

They shifted positions, now lying side by side. A beaming smile spread across Hina’s face like a flower coming into bloom. She gently nuzzled against his face like a puppy. To answer her fawning gesture, he opened his mouth.

Suddenly, though, he froze. Hina tilted her head to the side. She called out to him concernedly.

“Um... Master Kaito, is something the matter?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

Kaito chose to evade the question. In truth, he hadn’t wanted to worry Hina more than necessary, so he’d adjusted his blood in addition to his eyes. She had once told him the blood of a loved one had a sweet aroma to it. Now, though, it seemed as though she couldn’t make it out. He’d made a number of special alterations to his blood so as to make it odorless to automatons. Now he was sincerely glad he’d made the effort.

At the same time, he also swallowed down the blood that was rising up in his throat. However, if he kissed her, she’d catch on. And if she found out about his current state, it would undoubtedly fill her with a deep sadness. So instead of kissing her, he wrapped her up in a firm hug. As he did, his thoughts churned.

Yeah...I know.

In his heart, Kaito knew. It was quiet inside the castle. But that peace was nothing more than a lie.

Nothing remained the same forever. The outside world was overrun by underlings. He wasn’t wearing that butler uniform anymore, the one that had once been his staple outfit. And his body was currently being flooded with constant pain.

Kaito thought back to what he’d been told so earnestly earlier that night.

“You said you would save the world.”

Yeah, I swore I’d save the world.

At the same time, though, he had an objective that he was determined to see through to the end. He was completely unwilling to yield on it. That was why he hadn’t answered Izabella’s question. He’d simply smiled and persisted in his silence.

Could Kaito Sena kill Elisabeth Le Fanu?

If he couldn’t...

That would mean...

“...Hina, I have something important to ask you.”

“Ah, yes, Master Kaito? Whatever might it be?”

Hina seemed to have picked up on the seriousness of his tone. She stirred restlessly. He stroked her hair. After burning its silky texture into his hand, he spoke softly.

“Do you want to have a baby?”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?”

Hina’s voice instantly cracked. Her entire body shook. If Kaito hadn’t been hugging her, she probably would have fallen off the bed. Her eyes spun around in confusion.

“Mas-Master Kaito, that’s— Why—? How—?”

As her face went bright red, her questions became jumbled and confused.

Kaito just kept gently stroking her head.

With a forlorn expression on his face, he closed his eyes for a moment.

9
Kaito
and His
Bride

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

9

Kaito and His Bride

It's time for a story.

It's the story of a boy who was brutally killed by another, and a story of a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps it's a story of a child who was abandoned by his parents, and a hero who was abandoned by the world.

Either way, it's a story of admiration and folly.

It's a story of love, but not a story of romance.

Kaito Sena chose to fight on behalf of the person precious to him. He'd sworn he'd do anything for that dear woman's sake. He had no regrets. In fact, he was so free of remorse that it bordered on madness. If he had but one regret, though...

...it was in regard to his bride.



Kaito couldn't tell what kind of expression Hina was making. Even without looking, he could feel the warmth of her cheeks through his fingertips. He opened his mouth to speak, still not meeting her emerald eyes.

Or more precisely, he couldn't muster the courage to meet them.

"Elisabeth told us, right? We can make a humanoid homunculus from a mixture of our physical data, then cultivate it in your abdomen. Then if we insert my bodily fluids and nurture it with mana, we can make a baby, she said. If you want to, I have enough mana right now that we could easily finish the preparations."

"I, wh-wha...? Tha... Yes, I recall it distinctly, so clearly that I should surely remember it even if I lost all my memories. I wanted to have at least a dozen

beautiful children with you, Master Kaito, and preferably enough for our family to form a small country. But it's really all so sudden; my heart isn't, isn't, isn't —"

"When I was walking around the Capital earlier, I got to thinking. Even if someone dies, as long as the world is still there, a part of them lives on. People's lives are short, but one after another, they carve their names into the future."

Kaito continued stroking her hair, half to calm himself down. Hina was still in a tizzy. However, upon hearing how serious his tone was, she stopped mumbling and gave a small nod.

"Yes, Master Kaito, that's true. There are many things people leave behind."

"I swore that I'd save the world, that I'd rescue everything. If the sixth and seventh waves get released, humanity won't stand a chance. I have to end things before then. The final battle is almost upon us. But out of everyone, I decided to prioritize saving Elisabeth Le Fanu first."

Kaito laid out his two contradictory objectives. The only way to save the world was by killing God and Diablo while they were still sealed in their contractors' bodies. Their salvation lay in murdering Diablo, murdering God, and murdering humans. In order to save the world, they needed to kill Elisabeth Le Fanu.

There was no way to lay his two objectives atop the scales and keep them perfectly level.

There shouldn't have been, in any case. However, Kaito went on without mentioning that inconsistency.

"Hina, you should understand what that means, right? So..."

Hina's body stiffened. She closed her mouth, not saying anything. Then silently, she sank into thought. After catching his breath, Kaito buried his face in her shoulder. Then he told her what he'd been thinking.

"I figured if you and I had a kid...then you wouldn't be lonely."

"Master...Kaito..."

His name dribbled briefly from her mouth. She then pursed her lips.

When she looked up at him, the emerald eyes he'd been unable to meet seemed endlessly clear. She gently pushed him away, then got up and sat cross-legged atop the bed.

Kaito knelt in front of her in kind. She bit down hard on her lip.

Her face was downturned. Worrying she might be crying, Kaito tried to reach out to her. Before he could, she spoke: "Master Kaito, I don't intend to ask you to forgive me."

"Huh?"

"But I also don't intend to hold back!"

Hina shot her head up.

Her beautiful eyes were burning with a violent fury.

Then without holding back, she planted her fist square in Kaito's face.



The blow came hard and fast.

When an automaton came at you without holding back, it was no laughing matter.

If things had gone poorly, Kaito could have died. However, he wasn't as powerless as he had been before. He reflexively reinforced his body so he would be able to take the punch without having to dodge. As a result, the damage was minimal.

Even so, blood gushed out of his nose like a fountain.

Although the spurt of blood hit her directly in the face, Hina continued looking straight at Kaito. She offered no apology. That, coming from the same woman who would weep her heart out and fly into a rage if Kaito suffered so much as a scratch. Upon seeing her like this, Kaito came to a realization.

She'd had to snap there. She'd had to hit him.

That was the conclusion she'd reached, and so she'd put it into action.

"Please don't look down on me, Master Kaito."

Hina solemnly started talking. She glared at him with her fist still balled up. Her eyes were burning with the same fury as before, but at some point, clear tears had welled up in them as well.

“I’m well aware. I know what you’re trying to do, Master Kaito, and I know how you’re planning on doing it. *I’ve known from the very beginning.*”

“You’ve known...from the start?”

“Yes, from the moment you, with all your kindness, said you were taking charge. From then on, I’ve been able to guess everything you intended to do. And I decided it was all right, so I made my peace and remained closely by your side. And yet now after all this time...what was it you said? I believe you used the word *lonely*?”

The corner of Hina’s mouth twitched upward. Her clenched fist trembled. Her pale fingers weren’t just wet with Kaito’s blood, but with her own machine oil and imitation blood as well. Her skin was torn, revealing its unrefined innards.

Then the emerald dams burst. Big, round tears streamed down her face. When she continued, she was practically screaming.

“Of course, I’m lonely! I’ve been lonely *this whole time!*”

Kaito gazed at her in astonishment. The harsh truth he’d been avoiding had suddenly been thrust in front of his face.

Ever since we parted ways at the World’s End, all I’ve been doing is trying to save Elisabeth.

It’s time for a story.

It’s the story of a boy who was brutally killed by another, and a story of a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps it’s a story of a child who was abandoned by his parents, and a hero who was abandoned by the world.

Either way, it’s a story of admiration and folly.

It’s a story of love, but not a story of romance.

Nor is it a story of him and his bride.

Yet who would have thought the bride herself was aware of that?

All this time, I haven't talked it over with Hina, not even once.

As the pain shot through his face, Kaito came to realize just how cruel that was. Now, though, it was too late to apologize. There was nothing he could even tell her. The die had already been cast. Nothing he said could possibly merit forgiveness. For a long time, he'd been taking advantage of her sympathy. In a way, this was his punishment for that. Even so, though, his resolve remained unshakable. Stopping this story of his was no longer in his power.

Even if she resented him, even if she hated him, that was just how things were. But still, he didn't want to let things end like this.

With that sole thought in mind, Kaito opened his mouth and clumsily tried to string his words together.

"...Hina, I—"

"But really, that's all right."

"...Huh?"

"Even if I'm lonely, even if I'm sad, it's all right. As long as you are who you are, it can't be helped. She was the one you chose to protect. I was the one you chose to love. That's plenty. I'm completely satisfied with that."

Hina's tone abruptly softened. Kaito stared at her in blank amazement. Hina slowly reached out, then hugged him tight. She went on, not hesitating for a moment.

"I'm glad I was created. I was able to be by your side. I don't regret a single thing about my life. For that is what love is."

Her words were firm and sure. They sounded almost like a profession of love. As Kaito listened to them, he discovered something amiss. Hina's uniform-clad arms were wet, not with blood, but with some sort of clear liquid.

As he wondered what it was, Hina gently continued:

"However, there was one thing that I truly did get mad at you for. I wished to become part of your family, and you were kind enough to grant that wish. But please don't refer to children as tools to distract from loneliness. Our children...

If the future is graceful enough to permit us to stand alongside our children, then it should be when we've chosen to have them, and when we are ready to greet them together."

She stroked Kaito's back over and over.

And thus, in her unconditional love, she *forgave her groom*.

"It's okay, Master Kaito. You don't have to worry about me. I'm all right."

"I—I... I said I loved you. We were supposed to be a family, and I—"

"It's really okay. I understand. So please follow your heart—so that you may go forth without regrets and say with a smile that you were glad to have lived."

That's all I need.

So please don't cry.

Hina whispered those words to him. And in that moment, Kaito Sena finally realized something.

He had been crying.



Kaito Sena had no regrets. In fact, he was so free of remorse that it bordered on madness. If he had but one regret, though...

...it was in regard to his bride.

Hina stroked his head, as if to say there was nothing more that needed to be said. Heavy tears rolled down his face. He returned her embrace, practically clinging to her. Time drifted by as the two of them sat alone in their own little world.

And it was then and there that he arrived at a decisive answer.

Could Kaito Sena kill Elisabeth Le Fanu?

The answer he arrived at was crucial in determining the world's ultimate fate.

Eventually, he looked up. He gently drew away from Hina. Alarmed, she drew a handkerchief with a cartoonish spin. She then leaned over to wipe off the blood and tears stuck to Kaito's face. However, Kaito turned her down and

snapped his fingers. Azure petals and black darkness danced in the air around them.

The blood and tears were broken down into fine particles, then vanished. Hina's wound closed, too. It wasn't the flashiest spell ever. However, it was unclear if Elisabeth or Vlad in his heyday could have pulled it off so smoothly.

Hina blinked in surprise. Kaito bashfully asked her a question.

"By the way, did you notice me secretly gulping down that blood, too?"

"Of course, I did."

"And when I was taking down those hidden underlings?"

"I can't say I noticed every instance, but...probably eighty percent of the time, I was aware."

"Man, this wife of mine... Nothing gets past you, huh?"

"I've heard it's a time-honored tradition for wives to be dependable, after all."

Hina grinned. Once again, the two of them were eye to eye. Their faces drifted closer. Spontaneously, their lips met. After exchanging a kiss so long and deep that it left them craving air, Hina murmured: "Mm... Master Kaito, if I may..."

"What is it?"

"Well, um, even if we aren't making a child, I still think it might perhaps be nice to have something to remember the end of our date by."

Once again, her face went red. Without needing to think, Kaito reached out his hand and rubbed her soft cheeks. She gave a small squeak as he played with her face. Once he'd had his fill, he kissed her flushed skin. Over and over again, his lips traveled down her body.

Right as he was about to start nibbling her ear, she frantically raised her voice.

"Er, Master Kaito, uh, you haven't answered— Hwah, hwah-ha-ha-ha!"

"What other answer could there be?"

Kaito drew his lips toward the reddened nape of her neck. After loosening her

uniform's collar a little, he gently nipped at her clavicle. Hina's entire body shivered. As she did, Kaito brought his voice down and whispered slowly in her ear.

"If you're going to tempt me, my beloved, I'll gladly accept."

"O-overload."

"Wait, don't go all weak on me."

With an excited sigh, Hina started to fall over backward. Kaito frantically propped up her back.

They exchanged another glance and smiled at each other.

And with that, they pressed their lips together.



Holding your beloved in your arms.

That had to be one of the purest forms that happiness came in, Kaito Sena mused.

She's warm, she's lovely, and I don't want to let go of her. For if we separate, I will surely die.

And he was sure Hina felt the same way. The two of them were nuzzled up next to each other, the very symbol of all the happiness the world had to offer. Warm smiles were spread across their faces, and they were both adrift in blissful slumber.

Eventually, though, the morning arrived.

The final hours were upon them all.

Kaito slowly opened his eyes.

Hina was still asleep. Or to be more precise, she was automatically replicating a human's sleep. She was as defenseless as a baby. Kaito poked one of her white cheeks. Her lips faintly parted, and a few words spilled out from them.

Perhaps she was dreaming an automaton dream.

About her beloved.

However, Kaito didn't catch what she'd said. He silently slipped out of the bed. As he stood atop the cold, stone floor, he snapped his fingers. Azure petals and black feathers enveloped his thin body. Then they burst, and he was adorned in his black, military-like uniform once more.

He clutched his glass, blood-filled orb tightly. Without saying a word, he began sending his transmission.

"Attention, all troops.

"It's just as Izabella Vicker told you all from the Capital last night.

"After releasing the fifth wave, the Diablo pillar's activities will temporarily slow as it readies the sixth. And the troops of the sixth wave will be unbound from the shackles of the laws that bind this world. We, the living, will be powerless to oppose them.

"Thus, we have to end things before the sixth wave is released."

"After the fifth wave is annihilated, I ask that the surviving troops all gather before the God and Diablo pillars at the World's End."

For his final request, Kaito quietly voiced it out loud.

In truth, he didn't know if the three races would assemble in accordance with his request. In particular, the demi-humans would want to keep their focus on defending the pureblood sectors. And the Royal Knights aside, suspicion of him had taken root in the paladins. However, he still needed to gather as many people as he could.

It's just like Valisisa said—right now, everyone I can get my hands on is a pawn. And the more pawns I have, the better.

It was a ruthless way of thinking, but it was also true. His opponent's board was empty. Instead, two massive pillars towered above it. He needed to cram the board with as many pieces as possible in order to thwart his enemy's plan.

They'd surpassed the realm of drawing opposite lines of pawns and sending them to fight each other. Many people were probably going to die. With the help of a vanguard, though, they would finally be able to reach God and Diablo. And once they'd weathered the attacks from those in their way, Kaito would be

able to call the shots on his own.

He was the only person in the world powerful enough to topple those pillars.

If anyone doesn't want to come, that's fine, too. They can go ahead and pick where they want to die.

Their current situation had been brought about by the blooming of the flower of sin that all three races had shared a hand in raising. The punishment for their sloth and ignorance had finally caught up with them. If they averted their eyes, they would eventually end up paying with their lives. If they didn't want to die, they had no choice but to fight back.

That was the final duty that had been imposed upon the living. It was the one allowance remaining to them in this box of despair.

Kaito abruptly opened his mouth, then bluntly laid out his thoughts.

"Our enemies this time are God and Diablo. And the battle we're trying to fight is an act of blasphemy that not even the old world could carry out. But even so, if we want the world to be filled with happiness, if we choose to believe in our future, then this is the only path we can take."

For a moment, Kaito paused. His thoughts suddenly raced.

This was a world in which people would kill innocents in order to save themselves. Was it really worth believing happiness could come? However, he didn't have time to worry about that. The end had long since arrived on their doorsteps.

"We must take our swords in hand and reject the new world."

They were stupid, their lives were short, and all they could do was fight.

Yet even knowing how foolish it was, God and Diablo's creatures were rebelling against them.

"Everyone who lives will one day die."

That was precisely why they had things they refused to give up.

The decision they'd made was arrogant and sacrilegious in the extreme. And someday, those same people who'd chosen to slay God and Diablo together

would undoubtedly draw their swords and begin killing one another. Tragic as it was, Kaito knew that.

But so what. He cast his hesitation away.

Then he boldly encouraged the living for the choice they were making.

“There’s no need to be ashamed. Take up your swords and ready your spears. Our mission is to murder God, and to murder Diablo. Prayers won’t bring us salvation; screams won’t bring us mercy. The only thing we have to rely on is our own strength.”

“Intriguing... Intriguing, I say! You roar well, for a human!”

All of a sudden, a different voice cut into the transmission. Kaito narrowed his eyes.

The boisterous, laughing voice belonged to Valisisa Ula Forstlast.

Due to the beastfolk’s low proficiency with magic, her voice was interspersed with static. The voices of her subordinates rushing around behind her were audible as well. But none of that seemed to concern her, and she went on.

“Very well, Mad King! You possess a rebel’s greatest weapon: madness—that double-edged sword so desperately needed to fight back! I yield to you! Countless will die in this battle! So go forth and lead us into hell!”

“That’s the plan. All right, everyone...”

Kaito took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He closed his eyes.

At that moment, he felt as though his entire body had been buffeted by a fierce gale. However, the sensation hadn’t been caused by the wind.

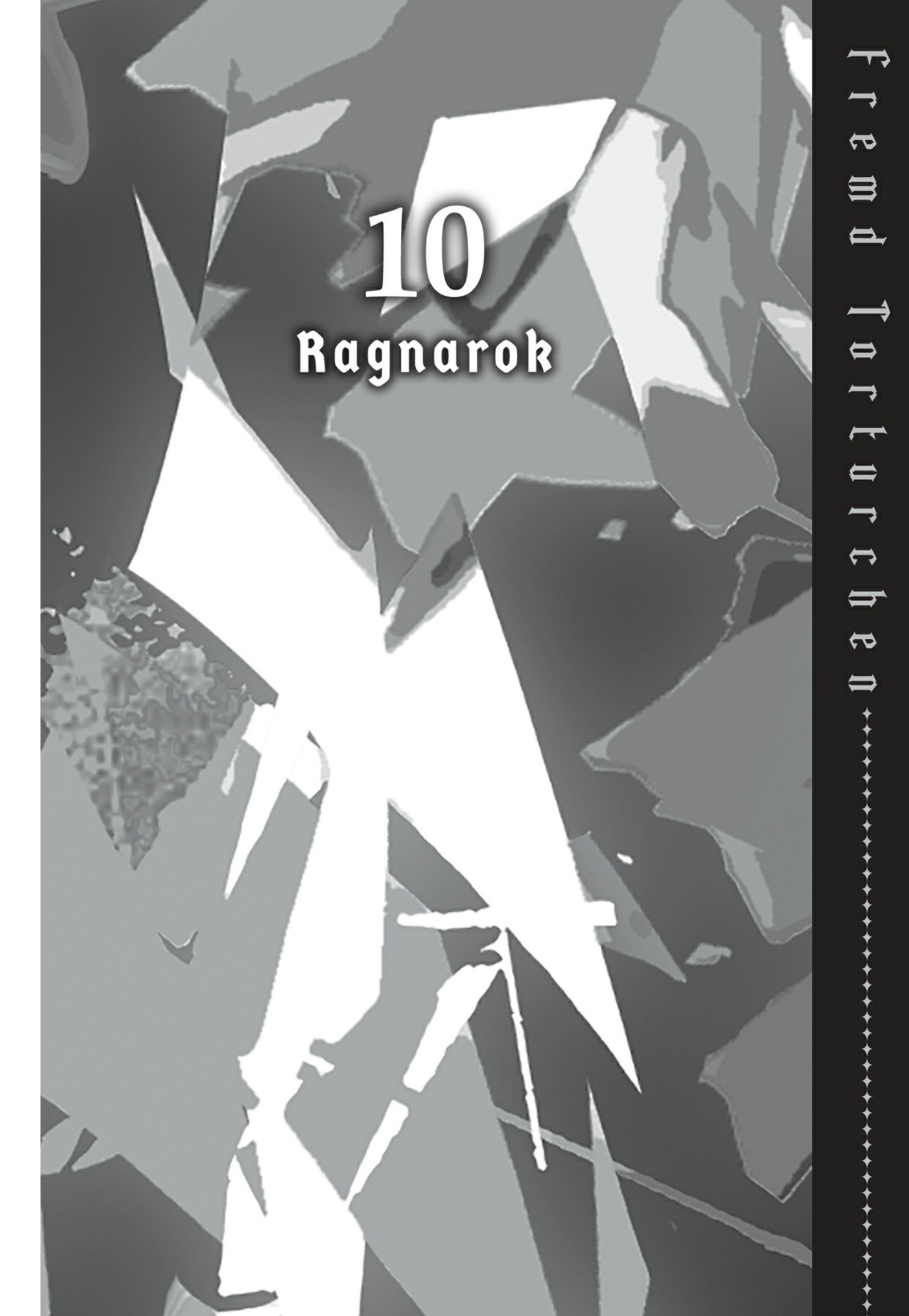
Innumerable people were listening to his words. The strength of their gazes was striking him like an arrow. Lute was kneeling, Aguina was adjusting his glasses, the Kaiser was snorting, Vlad was smiling sweetly, Vyade was looking down, Valisisa was smirking, La Christoph was crossing his arms, and the human king was blinking back tears. And countless soldiers were hanging on to his every word.

His next few words would no doubt lead many of them to their deaths.

Even so, he had no regrets.

And so the Mad King made his fearless declaration.

“This here will be our daybreak. Let Ragnarok begin.”



10

Ragnarok

Fremd Turchen

Ragnarok

The enemies from the fifth wave were just as repulsive as their predecessors. However, they weren't any worse than the fourth wave had been. And what's more, the Mad King and his bride performed a high-speed patrol of all the various fronts. As a result, they were able to clean up the fifth wave as fast as humanly possible.

Immediately thereafter, massive teleportation circles with shared coordinates were carved in the human lands, beastfolk lands, and demi-human lands simultaneously. While the current treaty had maintained a tenuous peace among their peoples, the deep-seated grudges they held against one another made it hard to believe such a thing could ever happen.

Furthermore, every troop advancing on the World's End had volunteered to go. After all, the battle they were embarking on was truly unprecedented.

The troops hadn't been able to get hard information from the Saint on how the old world had ended. For the people living in the current one, they were treading into completely unknown territory. And being able to keep one's sanity when faced with the prospect of the world dying was no mean feat.

Forcibly enlisting people who didn't want to go would only result in chaos, and possibly even friendly fire.

"That's right—from here on out, we don't need losers in our ranks. Remember, the moment you all took up your swords, you became victors."

As the dignified voice filled the air, the ground split loudly. A blade had been plunged deep into the ice. Valisra had driven her sword into the land made of snow and water, wind and mana.

Then she proudly placed her palms atop its hilt. An army of beastfolk thousands strong stood before her. Among them were some civilians who'd

joined as militia. Anyone who wasn't experienced in combat was likely going to their death. However, the first imperial princess had still loudly hailed them as victors.

“What have we lived for?! What did you take up your swords for?! To take back the day! To end death's black sway!”

As she stood majestically atop the silver ground, Valisisa shouted out words of encouragement to her army.

The mana-dense ice they were lined up on was dimly glowing, making it look almost blue. Snowflakes so large that they could make out each individual shape were piled up like handicrafts. However, several of them were stained bloodred and twisted into grotesque displays. Body parts of the three races—toes, ears, eyes—were intermingled with them without any rhyme or reason. And the sky overhead was burning black. It wasn't because underlings were swarming up there. It was due to the innumerable black feathers suspended in the empty space.

The wind that had once been so frighteningly clear and pure was now contaminated with the stink of rust. No traces remained of that beautiful, empty place where the solitude of everything having ended and the faint hope that something new would begin had commingled.

Kaito was once more cruelly reminded: Nothing in this world stayed the same forever. The once-peaceful land was gone, and there was no guarantee it would ever return. Yet as she stood atop it, the first imperial princess of the beastfolk boasted a will to fight that was untarnished.

Valisisa gripped the handle of her sword so hard that it creaked.

Her red fur rustling like a billowing flame, she continued her address.

“We are the proud sons and daughters of the Three Kings of the Forest, and for us, retreat is not an option! We will advance, and we will kill! With those deaths, we protect our people, we protect our country, and we protect our world! We will never surrender, so victory already lies in our grasp! Kill, kill, kill and die in victory's embrace! Before us, God and Diablo are mere trifles!”

Surprisingly, her voice was burning with gleeful bloodlust. Kaito's eyes went

wide. Even when faced with the despair that accompanied the end of days, her fury was as vibrant as ever. She was like a living flame.

Valisisa wrenched her sword free from the frozen earth, then made her loud, operatic proclamation.

“The world lies in the palms of our hands!”

““““In the palms of our hands!””””

The crowd’s roar rose up to meet her. The beastfolk’s armor, which was made primarily from the leather of their comrades, rattled as they yelled.

At the moment, none of them were wearing obstructive winter gear. Kaito was using his magic to protect everyone present. Vyade, as well as the first imperial prince and a number of other imperial-family members Kaito wasn’t familiar with, were standing behind Valisisa. Vyade’s dress was composed of a number of layers of thin fabric, giving her a graceful, ladylike appearance.

As he gazed at their backs, Kaito let out a murmur.

“Man, I don’t really know how to put it, but as an imperial princess, Valisisa is like a sword designed for emergencies...or, like, a gnashing fang or something. She calls me the Mad King, but I feel like she’s a perfect match for that title.”

“Indeed. It seems you’ve already noticed, Sir Kaito, but...the eyes that chose my sister weren’t clouded in the slightest. Our opinions may often differ, but she, too, has the capacity to be an excellent dynast.”

Vyade gently provided her assent. As the Wise Wolf of unclear age, the woman who received more support from the people than any other, and the veritable symbol of peace, the second imperial princess gave her firm judgment.

“My sister is precisely what the world needs in troubled times.”

When he heard her, Kaito nodded. Thanks to Valisisa’s speech, the beastfolk were in high spirits. Given the current situation, preserving the willpower of people with so little magical aptitude was a near-Herculean task.

The humans have La Christoph and Izabella Vicker...but the problem’s the demi-humans.

Kaito was well aware of that. At the moment, the three races were deployed

in a fan formation around the God and Diablo pillars.

The humans, with their mages, paladins, knights, and saints, were to the west, and the demi-humans were to the east. However, the plan was to directly send the cannon teams in right before they made contact with the enemy, so the demi-humans' main forces were going to join up with them later.

In truth, they had no proof that the demi-humans would actually show up. All they could do was trust in them.

No matter how things shake up, this is where it all ends.

This was where everyone's fate would be decided.

Kaito purposefully took in a lungful of the frigid air. At this point, he couldn't even feel pain from cold temperatures anymore. After letting out a white cloud of breath, he raised a hand.

"All right, I'm heading out."

"Do be careful. And may the protection of the Three Kings of the Forest be upon you."

Vyade gave him a gentle bow. The first imperial prince and the rest of the imperial family followed her lead.

Finally, Kaito looked out over the riled-up soldiers. When he did, he noticed a certain wolf-headed fellow among them. That unmistakable coppery fur belonged to Lute, the captain of the first squad of Vyade's private army.

He seemed to have noticed Kaito, too. Familiarity spread across Lute's face, and he almost opened his mouth. A moment later, though, he quickly corrected his expression. Somewhat guiltily, he went back to talking to his subordinates.

Perhaps it was his way of marking boundaries, or perhaps it had been born out of fear toward Kaito's transformation. It was impossible to know which. But ever since Kaito had become the Mad King, Lute hadn't started a conversation with him once.

In fact, ever since Kaito had made his proclamation back at the World Tree, they hadn't talked privately to each other a single time.

Kinda sad, but it is what it is.

Kaito nodded. However, after a few seconds of silence, he changed his mind and called out:

“Take care, Lute! And try not to get hurt, or you’ll make your wife sad!”

Lute whirled around as though he’d been struck. Clearly panicking, he opened his mouth. But Kaito didn’t wait for his answer. He hadn’t been looking to coerce a reply out of him. He’d merely said what he’d wanted to say.

Then he dropped the glass orb filled with his blood onto the ground. He gave Lute a big wave.

“Later!”

“S-Sir Kaito!”

What’s the matter?

Lute readied his legs, as though preparing to dash over to Kaito. However, he clenched his fists tight and, in the end, stood still. Soon, his unmoving form was blotted out by a wall of azure flower petals.

And then Kaito saw nothing.



The shock sent him to his death for a moment, but Kaito quickly recovered.

He’d arrived at a different part of the World’s End. There was not even a single member of the three races’ armies in this desolate, silver knoll. The only ones waiting for him were a man dressed in a black, aristocratic coat; a massive, supreme hound; and a lovely maid. It was his self-proclaimed father-in-law, the demon he was contracted to, and his bride.

Vlad let out an exaggerated voice, a perfect smile spread across his face.

“Well now, are you fully prepared to bid them farewell, my dear successor? Have you no more regrets? Nothing you’ve left undone?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

Kaito nodded dispassionately. Vlad gave a grandiose wave with his white, gloved hand. It looked like he hadn’t gotten over his elation at having obtained a body, as every gesture he was making was exceedingly theatrical. He gestured

at their surroundings as he spoke:

“What? There’s no need to be so tense. The strong have every right to bear property. Why, all you need do is wish for it, and this very world would be yours. None who stand upon it are your equal, after all. It then follows that what’s about to begin is a battle for hegemony among Diablo, God, and yourself. Why pay the ants any heed?”

“Don’t spout bullshit, Vlad. The soldiers are important.”

“Hmm. You have a point. I’d expect nothing less from you, my lord. Pawns are, in fact, vital. And infantry, in particular, is good to have in numbers. But the path they open belongs to you and you alone. As do the choices. It’s a privilege to be allowed to watch from the box seats.”

Vlad gave him a courteous bow. Kaito didn’t reply. Instead, he walked silently to the edge of the silver knoll. The rusty wind tousled his faded-brown hair. Suddenly, his field of vision expanded.

An azure rose and a crimson rose. The two vibrant flowers were in full bloom, stretching up toward the heavens.

Underneath the black, feather-filled sky, the two pillars were haughtily towering upward.

“Elisabeth...”

Faced with that otherworldly scene, Kaito let out a faint murmur. Supported by the human sacrifices at their cores, these two pillars, which shouldn’t have been able to exist, continued to manifest. The armies of the three races were waiting a short distance away. Like lurking predators, they were waiting for their signal, just out of reach of the briars that were winding around the pillars.

Kaito closed his eyes. He counted the seconds. The moment the imaginary clock hands overlapped, he opened his eyes again.

The beastfolk, demi-human, and human dispatchers acted just as they’d been instructed.

The bugles of war sounded out loudly, almost as if to suggest it was the true signal for the end of days to begin. The noises overlapped, and the sullied

ground started shaking. Kaito muttered to himself, as though to drive the point home.

“We gotta bring this story to an end.”

Thus, the flare of rebellion went up against the higher entities.

So that the people of this world could struggle valiantly and die believing in the future.



Over at the human army, the first thing the saints did was assume a strange formation.

Hand in hand, they formed a circle with La Christoph at its center. They looked like a group of infants playing a game. As proof that it was nothing so idyllic, many of the linked arms had undergone some manner of horrible transfiguration. A hand covered in scales was joined with one that had flowers blooming from the joints in its fingers. However, there was one girl with her legs bound in irons whose arms were resting idly by her sides. A female saint reproachfully grabbed her right hand.

The girl curled her lips into a pout. She turned to the man on her left.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey?”

“WHAT IS it?”

The man turned to look at her. The bottom half of his body was transparent, and numerous fish were swimming around inside. His smooth belly was like a big, round fish tank. Everything from his chest up, on the other hand, was emaciated and marked by deep wrinkles.

The girl whispered to the bizarre-looking saint, as though they were exchanging idle gossip.

“I—I, you see. I, believe, in God. Believed, in God. Believed, really, reeeeeeally hard. But ever, since, my legs, were blessed with, these holy wounds, my memories, have, been really, spotty, you see?”

“WHAT IS it?”

“If God said, it should be destroyed, then...shouldn't, the world, be

destroyed?”

A purehearted question left the girl’s lips. The face of her neighbor on the right stiffened. The man nodded in appreciation. Then softly but resolutely, his wrinkled face turned from side to side.

“NO, THAT’S, WRONG.”

“What’s, wrong, about it?”

“EVEN GOD, makes MISTAKES, I should THINK.”

The girl stared at him in puzzlement. The male saint’s lips twitched. After suffering a great deal of pain, he managed to form what could almost be described as a smile. He awkwardly went on.

“Calling EVERYTHING, God’s FAULT, and PURPOSELY committing WRONG ACTS, is not, FAITH.”

“...It’s not, faith?”

“NO—you see, prayer is supposed to be a one-way street.”

A silver fish splashed within his transparent abdomen. As it did, all the wrinkles faded from his face, revealing the visage of a beautiful boy. He looked to be around the same age as the girl. There was no hesitation in his eyes as he spoke.

“*‘The land, the power, and the glory are eternally Yours.’* We prayed for that to be the case. But using the fact that everything belongs to God as a pretext for wanting to destroy the world out of wickedness, or for greedily wanting to witness a miracle, are equally unforgivable. *‘Pray that God shall be your salvation.’* Believing that God shall be our salvation, no matter what may happen, is a form of faith as well.”

“I, don’t. I, don’t. I don’t, understand very well.”

“Once, I prayed. I prayed so fervently that my knees left impressions in the stone floor. For a hundred days, a thousand days, I prayed for salvation.”

A few words had suddenly escaped the boy’s mouth. Due to the burden that came with bearing a direct link to God, the vast majority of saints had lost their memories. However, it seemed he still remembered. Upon hearing that unusual

statement, the girl's eyes went wide. She asked him a question.

"Did you, find, salvation?"

"No, I didn't. The illness in my almshouse killed everyone. But after I moved past the rage and despair, I found that prayer had saved my heart. It was then that I wished to devote the short life I'd been given to saving others. And this holy transformation is the result of that. The stronger the wish, the stronger the link. Even though you don't have your memories, I'm sure all of you were the same."

"Were, we? Were, we, really? Could, it have, been?"

"I don't believe either the Grave Keeper or La Christoph were mistaken. As the sheep, it's our job to choose how we believe in God. We're weak. We can't live without projecting our hopes and wishes onto God. That is why, after we offer up prayer for prayer's sake alone, we must believe from the bottom of our hearts that His true form is beautiful."

This time, the fish that splashed up was gold. The boy instantly began aging. His face wrinkled up once more. He slowly raised a hand, the veins on it so thick that they looked almost like welts.

"That is, why, he, and I, are here."

"...Yeah. I guess, you're right. We're all, here, together."

The man and the girl gazed directly at La Christoph. Even though the end was upon them, he had patiently waited for the girl to make her decision. Eventually, she reached out her arm, grabbed the man's hand, and squeezed it tight.

Thus, the ring was complete.

The next moment, even though nobody had touched them, all the saints' shackles came free. They crashed to the ground, crushing snowflakes as they landed. With no signal, the saints began a chorus. Its solemn, mysterious tone caused the very air to ripple.

"Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAAA!"

A school of fish. Rainbow light. Drops of blood.

In concert with the voices, they all spread out at once.

They made for the center, where La Christoph stood.

He solemnly spread out his arms, parting his long, black hair. Glittering lights began violently coalescing within his exposed rib cage. The fanciful animals and fluids the other saints had emitted were being sucked inside.

From the very start, he'd had a flock of white skylarks kept within his ribs.

Now those small birds were voraciously consuming everything else that came in.

The skylarks in La Christoph's ribs melted together, then expanded. It was as though a new organ had sprung forth from within him, then became engorged and started encroaching on the rest of his body. Great pain seemed to accompany the transformation, as his body violently convulsed.

La Christoph spat up an unseemly mass of blood and saliva. Even so, he managed to wring his voice out.

"We...gather...and...wait."

As he spoke, his rib cage opened up. It was like a rusty gate being cast open. Eventually, his bones had completely blossomed. A pair of white wings shot out. It was a massive bird, larger than even the ones La Mules had once summoned. It split the air with a cry so high-pitched that human ears failed to register it.

La Christoph, the Modest Birdkeeper, spoke with unnatural fluidity.

"We lay unto you our humble complaint, O Lord!"

"Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAAA!"

The bird flapped its wings. Then it flew so fast that human eyes couldn't possibly make it out. The only things visible were the white feathers falling like snow in its wake. It barreled into the underlings that were stationed as the Diablo pillar's permanent guard. In an instant, the fly-shaped creatures were evaporated. This intense opening salvo instantly drew the enemy's attention.

Taking full advantage of the opening, the beastfolk launched their attack as well.

“Ready—fiiiiiiiiiiiiire!”

Arrows rained down on the flies from their flank. Normally, physical attacks should have had little effect, even if they came from consecrated weapons. And all the more so, given how close they were to the Diablo pillar. Yet each of the underlings the arrows struck twitched and toppled to the ground. As she watched their deaths through her telescope, Valisisa let out a hearty laugh.

“Heh, just like we thought. The effects of that flesh-searing poison are indiscriminate.”

The beastfolk were using poison arrows. And the poison had come from none other than the underlings themselves. The healers had taken the recovered corpses, analyzed them, and reproduced the venom. Furthermore, Kaito had flooded all the poison with mana, doubling its potency.

In order to prevent friendly fire, they could only use it at the very start of the battle. But as an opening move, the blow it dealt was more than telling.

Countless underlings had been felled, and the wall surrounding the pillar collapsed.

Three waves of soldiers began making their advance. Vlad murmured, as though he were a spectator at a sporting event.

“Both sides have started by advancing their pawns, it would seem.”

“Yup. So far, everything’s going according to plan. No problems yet.”

Kaito nodded. Beside him, two bat-like wings were beating against the air. The Kaiser was a beast who could change his size at will, so Kaito was sitting atop his gigantic demon alongside Hina and Vlad.

At the moment, the supreme hound’s physique surpassed even that of a dragon. Below them, the underlings’ dwindling ranks were being divided into three groups. Kaito and his team were able to slip through the opening and rush toward the Diablo pillar unnoticed. As they did, though, the atmosphere began changing. A cloying, roselike aroma filled the air.

A wicked smile spread across Vlad’s face. As she held down her hair, Hina widened her eyes.

“Oh-ho-ho, *here it is.*”

“Master Kaito...”

“Yeah, I know. This is where the real fight starts.”

The Diablo pillar was getting ready for the sixth wave, so it was currently dormant. Even in the depths of slumber, though, it was still a destructive force *meant to annihilate the world*. It shuddered, as though it were alive. The roses decorating its mysterious surface all reverted to buds, like they were men’s eyes or women’s lips closing. However, they soon reopened, and when they did, something had been born amid their dozens of petals.

Massive figures dripping with mucus descended from within the meaty petals.

It was like some sort of horrific childbirth. They cascaded through the air, and when they landed, everything shook. The icy ground split open. Several soldiers screamed as they toppled into the abyss.

Vlad stroked his chin, then let out an amused chuckle.

“Heh, I suppose that would make these knights or rooks, then.”

The things shook their bodies to clear themselves of the mucus. The sticky membrane covering them came off, too. Upon being freed, they rose to their feet. When Kaito saw their colossal, black figures, he was reminded of some words he’d once heard.

He recalled the fragmentary memories the Saint had seen during her visions of the end-time.

“Azure blades cleaving through the earth. Black titans.”

The black titans were composed of intertwined briars. Thousands of bones were packed inside each of their bodies, reinforcing their contours from within. In their hands were huge, azure axes, designed to decapitate, with sizes befitting the titans’ forms.

It was like an encore of the old world’s death being played before their eyes.

Yet in a way, the black titans resembled the Torture Princess’s Boondock Saints and Wicker Man, too.

Each time the Diablo pillar created an unusual underling, it probably based it off memories from the person who was serving as its sacrifice. However, these things it had made looked even more executioner-esque. And because the axes had round, spade-like blades, the titans gave off the impression of a gravedigger as well.

That analogy is probably accurate in more ways than one.

After all, the black titans had appeared to bury the old world.

They calmly strode forth, giving all the living cause to mourn.



The simple truth of the matter was that size alone was sufficient to be threatening.

The larger someone was, the more destructive their attacks would be. Conversely, any damage they sustained likely wouldn't be fatal. If enough ants gathered together, they could take down an elephant. But if the elephants' ranks swelled as well, it was a different story altogether.

Sooner or later, the armies would be wiped out. And to make matters worse, the titans didn't have any obvious weaknesses.

Ironically, the one trait the three races could capitalize on was how big of a target the titans were.

In other words, any attack they launched was highly likely to hit.

"Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAAA!"

The saints shot off yet another bombardment. White birds pierced through the abdomens of three of the titans.

Each of them toppled over, scattering bones and flame as far as the eye could see. The vines making up their bodies came undone, and several uninjured titans were caught up in them. One even got completely entangled and toppled over headfirst.

"Attack! And if it starts moving, withdraw!"

Avoiding the fissures in the ground as they ran, the beastfolk swarmed the downed titan. Matters regarding vegetation just so happened to be their

specialty.

In the blink of an eye, the beastfolk had severed the vines that made up its limbs. Bones tumbled out and scattered around. After they'd surgically dealt with the vines, the beastfolk all fled. The titan writhed. However, its limbs sat motionless.

Eventually, the fallen titan was crushed underfoot by its comrades.

The beastfolk's attack pattern seemed almost comedic. However, Vlad muttered in admiration.

"Hmm... La Christoph, was it? It would appear the saint's shots were aimed with precisely that chain reaction in mind. The fact that he's playing the role of a cannon all on his own is astounding enough, but to think he's able to maintain his sanity, too... If only he weren't a saint... What a tragic waste of that man's talents."

"Hold up. You aren't planning anything sketchy like trying to recruit him, are you?"

"Ha-ha! Worry not, my dear successor! As my king and my son, you are my one and only! My heart merely throbs when I see a talented individual, that's all."

"Dunno how happy I am about that, either... They're putting up a better fight than I expected, but...things are starting to get ugly."

There were two reasons why La Christoph had taken up the role of a cannon.

Attacking the Diablo pillar was like sieging a castle. They'd realized heavy artillery would be more effective than small arms, and a sledgehammer would be better yet. That was the first reason. The other was how poor the saints' endurance was. They weren't accustomed to battle. They would recover with rest, but they simply couldn't just fire repeatedly. In other words, by serving as the main cannon, La Christoph could not only amplify their power, but he could also help alleviate their burden. But even so, the saints were starting to convulse.

In middle of their group, La Christoph's robes were stained red. Fresh blood was trickling down his jaw. But the fatigue the saints in the circle were suffering

was far more severe.

They only have a few more shots in them, huh?

And to make matters worse, the horror of the situation was eroding the soldiers' mental states. Pools of blood dotted the ground, some of them so large that they were like veritable swamps. The viscous, red liquid resembled overripe berry jam. These pools had once been members of the three races; they were the remains from where they'd been crushed by the massive feet and axes.

If you looked closer, you could make out flattened bones and armor sitting in them.

They were too misshapen to even be called "corpses."

Now then, what to do.

Kaito pondered the issue. If he joined the fray, then things would undoubtedly take a turn for the better. However, he was also the sole person who had the power to topple the Diablo pillar. He couldn't let it notice him until he was right up next to it. After all, it was impossible to know how intelligently it would react.

There was a chance that it would put its preparations for the sixth wave on hold and intercept the armies' attack by deploying any finished underlings it had. If that happened, the three races would be annihilated, and Kaito's ability to arrive at the pillar in time would be jeopardized.

Consequently, he continued facing forward and asked a question.

"Can you handle it, Hina?"

"Of course. As your heart desires."

She didn't want to separate from him. However, she left that part unsaid.

The hem of Kaito's black long coat waved about as he turned around. Behind him, his bride was standing with her halberd at the ready. Parting here would mean she wouldn't be able to participate in his plans for when he reached the pillar.

Yet even so, she offered no objections. She just smiled the same way as

always.

And that precisely was why Kaito was able to fully entrust her with his brief order.

“Then I leave it to you, my love.”

“And I serve with great pleasure.”

With that, Hina turned on her heel and unhesitatingly leaped off the black dog’s back. The air resistance caused her frilly skirt to billow up. The ribbon on her back fluttered as she descended straight down.

Hell lay beneath her.

The saints’ bombardment was falling behind schedule. However, the titans’ ranks were only swelling. By now, there was enough blood to fill a lake.

“Don’t stop moving! Spread out and—”

At that moment, Valisisa noticed the falling object. She frantically grabbed her telescope. She quickly realized it was one of the Mad King’s allies, but she let out a dissatisfied murmur all the same.

“A...maid?”

And so the maid landed on the battlefield.

The soldiers around her stared, their mouths agape. Hina paid them no heed. She took off at a run, her explosive burst of speed propelling her toward a titan. It raised its foot, then brought it down hard. The moment before its sole made impact, Hina leaped. In doing so, she was able to avoid the effects of the ground-shaking tremor.

Then she brought her halberd down on the titan’s foot.

“HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

With an earsplitting battle cry, she buried her blade in its body, slicing through bundles of vines. The shock wave rippled through the titan and caused bones to fly out its backside. Unable to withstand the weight of its body, its severed foot started snapping and tearing.

Then the titan toppled over, taking the one on its right down with it. A

thunderous echo filled the air. Then the battlefield grew silent.

As countless gazes landed on her, Hina wrenched out her halberd and murmured:

“Send as many as you please. Here, I shall display my devotion. Here, I shall display my love. Here, I shall vent my rage.”

A loud cry of joy rose up.

The tide of battle shifted once more.



As the black titans walked, two maidens wove between their earthshaking feet at top speed.

One was swinging her ax about wildly and using its recoil to fling herself through the air, and the other was whittling away at the ice while skating atop it with her insectile, sicklelike legs. Their appearances differed greatly, but both their legs were mechanical in nature.

One was a maid. The other was a paladin with over half her body mechanized.

Hina and Izabella’s movements surpassed anything a human could muster.

“I’m grateful you came! On my own, I had my hands completely full just guarding the saints and guiding the soldiers to cover. They’re large, sluggish... Jeanne might refer to them as **big ol’ good-for-nothings**, perhaps.”

“I concur! When it comes to mobility, we’re second to none! All we need to do is chip away at them without slowing down!”

As they ran, the two of them plunged their blades into the titans’ legs, then continued dashing past them. Their weapons moved in tandem, slicing through the vines. The blows they dealt weren’t fatal, but they were able to avoid pursuing any one target too hard.

The two of them took an intentionally intricate path and circled their way between a number of their foes. Eventually, the vines reached their limit, and they loudly snapped. Thanks to Hina and Izabella’s valiant efforts, the titans’ advance slowed to a crawl.

Their bodies may have been suited for crushing soldiers flat, but making tight

turns wasn't exactly in their wheelhouse.

The soldiers began their advance between the titans' crippled legs, rushing past them as though the limbs were large trees in a vast forest.

"Make haste! Don't look up at them and don't hesitate!"

"Go! The titans are all gathered together! Let's leave them in our dust!"

At the moment, the bulk of the soldiers were riding astride the beasts their mages had summoned, without regard for what race their seatmates were.

While Hina and Izabella had been fighting, the soldiers had been gathering up the titans' mana-rich bones, which the beastfolk then used to craft into magic tools. Meanwhile, the mages from the Capital had been investigating what summoned beasts could still act at the World's End. Thanks to their combined efforts, they'd been able to draw up summoning circles and call the beasts forth en masse. One of the elderly merchants gave a boisterous laugh.

"Ha-ha-ha! I love it! It's not every day that such vast riches pile themselves up on your doorstep for free!"

The creatures, which looked like crosses between lizards and horses, gripped the ice tightly with their claws as they galloped atop it.

Eventually, they managed to leave the titans behind entirely.

They'd gotten close to the Diablo pillar. The monstrosity that had loomed over them from afar was nearly at hand.

Unnoticed, Kaito's team had quietly drawn near it as well. Perhaps sensing the titans were at a disadvantage, the Diablo pillar had stopped birthing new ones. Everything looked to be going well. However, Vlad suddenly crossed his arms.

He spoke matter-of-factly as he reported on the situation.

"Hmm, it seems our smooth ride is nearing its end."

"Yeah. The enemy has a plan."

And just as they'd said, the Diablo pillar began undergoing another transformation.

The rose petals closed tight, then spun as their buds reopened. Something came pouring out, along with a shower of nectar. It called to mind an image of mantises hatching. One after another, they plopped down onto the frozen earth.

After falling vertically, the “women” stood on their own two legs. The space in front of the pillar was packed to the brim with their pale, naked bodies.

The “women” were like a human wall. Vlad let out a small laugh.

“I see, I see. The bishops, then.”

“...Elisabeth? No, no, that’s not right.”

“So quick to retract your words, my dear successor. I think the resemblance is rather notable, myself. Although, I’ll admit it’s a bit mixed.”

The things’ appearances looked a bit like Elisabeth. They were extraordinarily beautiful. However, their skeletal structures differed from hers. Overall, they were thinner than Elisabeth, and they looked to have an unstable, ephemeral quality to them. Kaito’s conclusion, although he knew it would have incited Elisabeth’s wrath, was that the Saint’s form had been mixed in as well.

More than anything, though, there was just something different about them, something that made it impossible to think of them as human.

Something about them was overwhelmingly different. Their very existences seemed off.

Their bodies were completely devoid of pigmentation. They looked like snow sculptures, or perhaps carved ice or glass. Their bodies were impossibly smooth and white. Their faces weren’t covered in skin, but they didn’t look like they were covered in raw flesh, either. Given the current situation, though, the strangest thing about them was the fact that they seemed to lack any body parts specialized for combat.

Suddenly, Kaito was struck by an ominous premonition. An image shot through his brain like a bolt of lightning.

Back when we were fighting the three fused demons at the Capital— What happened then?

Thanks to La Mules's bombardment, the mass of flesh had incurred severe damages. Its wounds had frothed like they were boiling, and body parts had smoothly protruded out from them. After they'd healed, a man's flaccid face had appeared in the muscle tissue.

He'd opened his thick lips, then emitted a gray roar.

As a result, the Church's strongest fixed battery, La Mules, had killed herself.

Due to the demon's mental attack.

"Hina!"

"Everyone, please, you mustn't look them in the eyes!"

Hina's response to his warning from on high was immediate. She shouted. But she was too late.

All at once, the "women" had opened their eyes.

Their eyes, like black pearls, swept over the soldiers. The darkness that had been hidden behind their ivory eyelids took on an unnatural light. Even though he wasn't looking at them directly, Kaito could tell. Reflected in them were two things: a turbulent rainbow, like a piece of the universe had been carved away, and a multitude of unborn possibilities.

They blinked, and the darkness returned. All at once, the army froze.

A great silence swept over the area.

It was a stillness that was incompatible with a battlefield.



The silence was broken in the worst way imaginable.

A strange laughter had broken out from here and there.

""""Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee. Heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.""""

The saints were laughing like children. The man with the fish in his belly, in particular, seemed pleased. He had immediately moved to cover the girl, and she was wriggling about in his arms. She shouted with her eyes shut tight.

“What, what, what is it? Hey, what happened, hey?”

That’s bad.

Kaito gulped. The vast majority of the saints held severe trauma deep in their hearts.

If nothing else, their deep connections with God had shattered their minds. Even though some of them had managed to maintain their sanity, who knew what would happen if their memories from before they’d reached that state were returned to them?

Kaito was reminded of La Mules’s death.

In an act of pure innocence, she’d bitten off her own tongue.

After the saints, the soldiers began moving as well. Over the past few days, the constant battles had stretched their nerves to the breaking point. Many of the militia, in particular, had lost not just their families, but all their relatives as well.

They took their swords in hand and turned them on themselves.

Tears flooded from their wide-open eyes.

“...!”

Kaito couldn’t think of any way to stop them. He raised his hand, planning on at least giving them a sudden shock.

The moment he did, though, a terrible roar shook the air.

“Wha—?”

Naturally, Kaito’s eyes went wide. Cannonball after cannonball after cannonball had crashed into the women.

At first, they didn’t seem to have caused any change. Gradually, though, cracks began splintering across the women’s bodies. Before long, they shattered. Eyeballs, which were perhaps their true forms, spilled out, screamed, and vanished.

Immediately thereafter, the cannons turned on the summoned beasts the soldiers were mounted on. The creatures let out pitiful screams, and the vast

majority of their riders were sent flying. Before the soldiers could stab themselves, they lost their grips on their swords.

Confused shouts rose up in succession. Thanks to the noise and the impact, the soldiers had regained their senses.

“Wh-what is it? What’s going on?”

“What just happened? H-hey, you, what’s wrong? Put that down!”

The few soldiers who were still deranged were stopped by their comrades. As for the saints, they’d been snatched up in a large net and were currently struggling in confusion. Kaito breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The cannon fire continued incessantly.

The relentless, merciless bombardment served to illustrate the stubbornness, or to an extent, the ill nature of the ones unleashing it.

“Ready, aim, fiiiiiiiiiiiiire!”

Thoom, thoom-thoom, thoom, kaboom!

The successive impacts shattered the backup “women” as they came in. The repair and transport teams brought new cannonballs with them. As always, the manner in which they were sustaining their continuous fire hardly seemed possible.

It was an impressive technique, one that took full advantage of the armies’ ability to mass-produce gunpowder and metal.

After soothing her steed, Valisisa confirmed the newcomers’ identities and let out an astonished shout.

“Ha, I never thought you’d actually come, Aguina Elephabred!”

“Just Aguina is fine. And what, may I ask, are you talking about? I was told this would be our daybreak. Surely, you heard the same. It isn’t as though we merely realized the pureblood sectors would be overrun at this rate or anything.”

Aguina turned up the corners of his mouth as he adjusted his glasses. Valisisa replied with a scornful laugh.

The bombardment went on, its raucous noise rocking the ground. Fragments and eyes from the “women” went flying. Izabella turned toward the titans approaching them from behind and dashed off to stop them in their tracks once more. At long last, the Diablo pillar finally lifted up its vines. Then it brought them crashing down on the beastfolk cannons like massive, thorny whips.

“Don’t look down on us lower beiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiings!”

A group of paladins rushed forward, holding their consecrated shields overhead. With them, they caught the blow from the vines.

The force of the impact drove their feet deep into the ice. As they endured the pressure, Hina swung her halberd.

With it, she cleaved through a multitude of vines. The Diablo pillar’s attention was completely focused on its chaotic battle against the soldiers.

“Well, if we want to press on, I daresay now’s the time to do it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go.”

Kaito and his group made their way toward the Diablo pillar without stopping. The aroma grew even stronger. An azure rose in full bloom grazed his arms. Soon, they’d be able to see the human sacrifice at the pillar’s core. Just a little longer until they reached their destination.

Then the Kaiser, who’d been silent up until this moment, raised his voice.

“Hey, boy.”

“Oh man, you startled me... What’s up all of a sudden?”

“Would you mind if I did some killing?”

“Huh?”

Kaito let out a trite interjection.

He couldn’t understand what it was he’d just been asked.

“What do you—?!”

Suddenly, Kaito’s vision inverted. Confused as he was, though, he managed to piece together what had happened.

He'd been shaken off the black dog's back. Far above his head, he could make out the hound's figure and the hellfire burning in his eyes. Panicking, he tried to cast a spell of flotation.

That moment, he was rocked by a sharp impact. It was a different sort of pain than the kind that constantly assailed his body. More delicate.

"...Huh?"

The supreme hound had sunk its fangs into his chest.

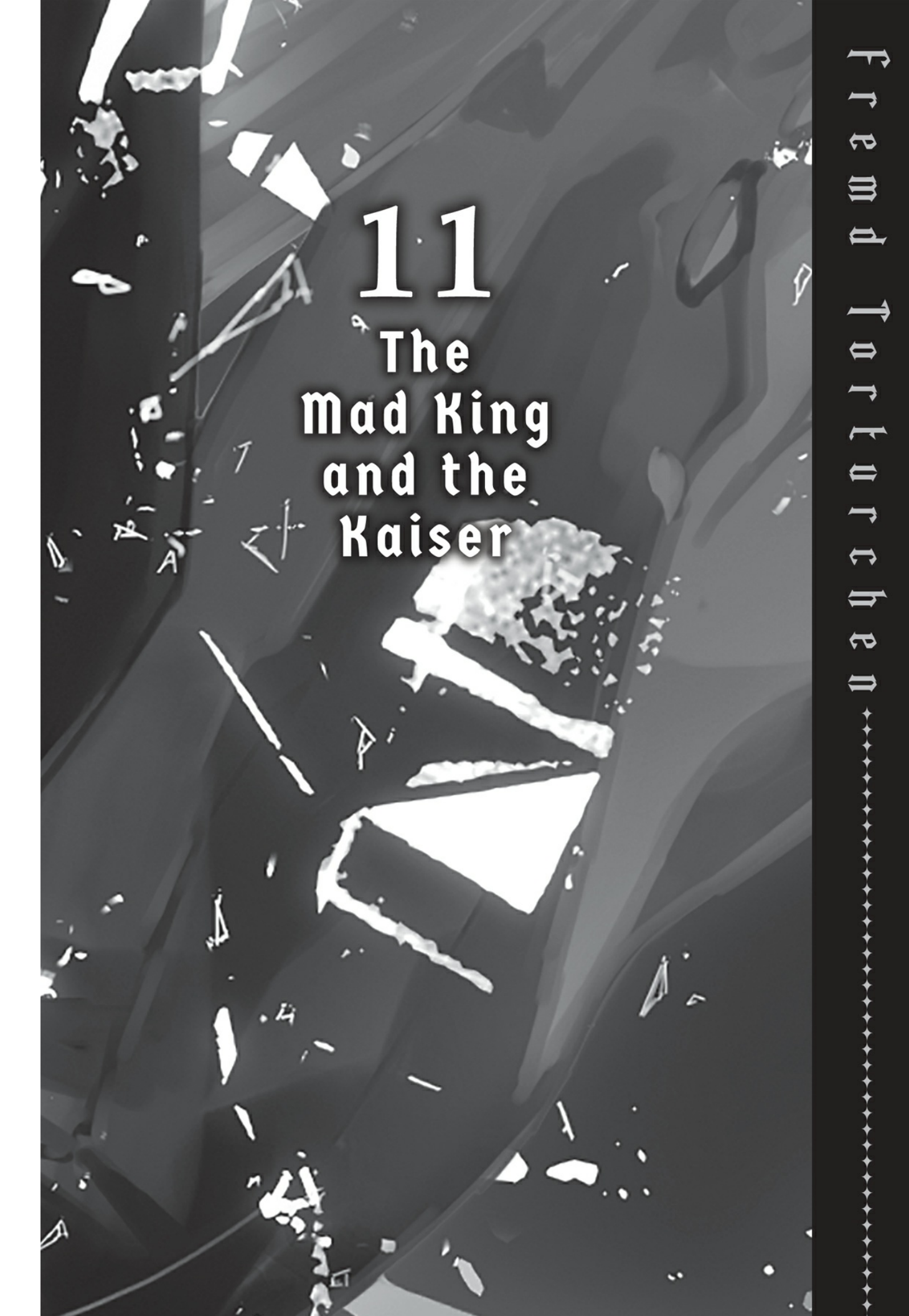
The Kaiser bit down hard.

"I see, I see. Before you reach the queen, it seems you'll need to go through the king."

Vlad murmured to himself as he floated alone in the air. It was unclear what he was thinking; he'd only curled his lips into a disagreeable smile.

Blood surged. Organs tumbled out. The Kaiser snorted.

And with that, Kaito's contractual partner ripped the bottom half of his body clean off.



11

The
Mad King
and the
Kaiser

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

11

The Mad King and the Kaiser

“Not one to die, then? Hmph, as I thought. You know, Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain, you really can’t be called ‘human’ anymore.”

“Thanks, I guess. So what’s up all of a sudden?”

As he watched his own flesh get bitten off and swallowed, Kaito gave his calm reply. The bottom half of his body was being eaten as he spoke. However, new flesh rapidly grew forth from the foul cross section.

Viscera wriggled and knit together like tentacles. Bones regrew, and skin and muscle fibers pasted themselves onto them. Kaito kicked off against the air with his newly regrown legs so he could face his demon. Back when the Kaiser had first given his opinion of him, Kaito had gotten one of his arms bitten off. Unlike back then, though, he didn’t feel an ounce of fear this time.

Ah... I get it.

Now that things had gotten to this point, a visceral feeling finally hit Kaito. He was on an equal footing with the Kaiser. But a human existing on the same level as a demon was an aberration that the world couldn’t permit.

In other words, he was *beyond salvation*.

“‘What’s up,’ hmm? Ha, you titter so casually, even when faced with a demon. Isn’t that right, boy? O unworthy master of mine? O Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain?”

“I’m asking you, what’s going on? If you’ve got something on your mind, then out with it already.”

“I could ask you the same—just what do you intend to do from here?”

The Kaiser narrowed his burning eyes as he posed his question to Kaito. It was similar to the one Izabella had asked him.

It was a rebuke, like one asked before making a final judgment.

Far below them, the fierce battle raged on. The three races were putting up a solid fight, but it was clear that the scales would eventually tilt against them. The favorable position they held was temporary.

At the moment, time was a treasure more precious than diamonds or gold. However, Kaito gave no answer.

He simply smiled a silent smile. The supreme hound let out a low growl.

"Is it something you can't say, O master of mine?"

"..."

"Something you can't say to me?"

Kaito persisted in his silence. In a way, that made perfect sense. It was just like that time with Hina. In fact, it might have been worse. He had nothing he could say to his hound, no excuse left to make.

...It's time for a story.

It's the story of a boy who was brutally killed by another, and a story of a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps it's a story of a child who was abandoned by his parents, and a hero who was abandoned by the world.

Either way, it's a story of admiration and folly.

It's a story of love, but not a story of romance.

And it certainly isn't a story that demons have any place in.

Consequently, the next words that came out of Kaito Sena's mouth hardly served as an answer.

"Sorry, Kaiser, but I'm gonna be making use of you until the bitter end."

"This marks the first time, boy. The first time I, the supreme Kaiser, have ever experienced hatred."

The Kaiser bared his fangs. The flames burning in his eyes had changed color ever so slightly. For the first time, they bore the hue of true rage. Yet

surprisingly, they also seemed somehow pleased.

Perhaps it was the result of him bearing the influence of not just his mediator, but his master as well. The Kaiser let out a passionate roar.

“I took a liking to you. That madness, that perversion, the foolishness with which you seized despair in hope’s name! Watching you fall was to be quite the show. But you—you—you would sink to such depths?!”

“Yup. And I’m gonna do what I need to do, whether you like it or not.”

“You think I would allow such a thing?”

“Not a chance, right?”

“Then there remains but one path for me to take.”

The Kaiser opened his jaw wide. His neatly lined-up teeth flashed, and his vast oral cavity looked almost like a coffin.

The smell of blood and carrion flooded the air. Kaito silently sighed. He knew what would come of this.

Welp, this is gonna be unproductive.

After all, no fight between the two of them would ever be settled.

Whenever Kaito gathered pain, the Kaiser’s mana was restored as well. In other words, the two of them were only growing stronger. All that would happen would be that they’d eternally shred each other to pieces and revive back to life. The Kaiser was no fool. He undoubtedly was already aware of that fact. Yet even so, he made no moves to temper his bloodlust.

Despite himself, Kaito let out a chuckle. He called out to the higher entity in sheer amusement.

“Hey, Kaiser, have you noticed yet?”

“Noticed what, O fool who proclaims himself a Mad King?”

“You’re acting just like a human.”

The beast’s eyes burned bright. At least, it looked that way to Kaito. Then with no warning, the Kaiser launched himself like a meteor. The black streak ignored its muscles’ limits as it descended on Kaito.

The Mad King braced himself. When he did, though, he suddenly found another figure standing before him.

“Huh?”

“Come now, this should hardly come as that much of a surprise.”

No, thought Kaito, *this is definitely surprising*. However, he didn’t have time to put that thought to words. The black meteor was drawing nearer.

The man standing before Kaito calmly thrust out his arm. Black darkness and azure flower petals billowed from his white-gloved palm, then transformed into a host of blades. But the Kaiser didn’t stop. He just plowed right through them. His jaws were almost upon them.

“Hmm.”

Vlad Le Fanu muttered, seeming greatly interested.

That was the only reaction he gave.

Then a moment later, Vlad’s right arm was bitten in Kaito’s place.



“I see, so this is what it’s like to have a dulled sense of pain. I knew about the whole *getting burned alive* thing, but still, this is most intriguing. And it’s awfully convenient to be able to avoid dying merely by stopping the bleeding. Using that to render attacks invalid... My, you are strong.”

“What are you playing at, Vlad? Buffoonery has its limits, you know.”

The Kaiser growled menacingly. Vlad, on the other hand, just waved his right arm. The bleeding had stopped. The hem of his aristocrat’s coat rustled. Strangely unconcerned, he responded in an affected, operatic manner.

“You know, Kaiser, you and I were supposed to rule the world, once. But dashed as our dreams may have been, the vicissitudes of fate have led us here. Given that fact, isn’t there something more pressing we should be doing than whiling away the hours killing each other in vain?”

“What are you babbling about, He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind? Has your own hell finally consumed that mind of yours?”

“Oh, please. Hell is but a place—one you can find just about anywhere. How could such a thing possibly hope to consume me?”

A twisted grin crept across Vlad’s face. However, he made no moves to step away from his place before Kaito. Instead, he spread his arms wide, leaving the gnawed chunk of his arm as it was. He tilted his head to the side in the same strangely childish manner as he always did. Suddenly, though, his expression flooded with unbridled hatred.

Kaito was taken aback. He hadn’t seen him make that face in a long while. When Vlad next spoke, his voice was icy cold.

“I am a hedonist, capable of enjoying even the most bitter of hardships. But I was not born to lose.”

“Just what exactly are you going on about?”

“The end of days? Splendid. The destruction of all? Wonderful. I’ve no complaints in the slightest. And that pillar, in particular—it’s the peak of beauty, the apex of ugliness. Truly, *magnificent* is the only way to describe it. And yet...”

Upon hearing those words, Kaito was reminded of something.

It had been right after Elisabeth and Jeanne had been captured at the World’s End.

At some point, Vlad had moved over to where the two pillars stood. His arms were spread wide, and his eyes were glittering as he gazed at the Torture Princesses’ transformations.

“It’s magnificent... It’s the peak of beauty, the apex of ugliness... Truly, ‘magnificent’ is the only way to describe it.”

His face was as innocent as a child watching a meteor shower. However, his expression suddenly took a more serious turn.

As he began rapidly coming back to his senses, Vlad started thinking.

“...Still, though... Hmm...”

Back then, what was it he’d been thinking about?

Now the answer to that question would become clear.

“Think about it. At the end of the day, the thirteen demons and their king were nothing more than *the prelude to the end of days*. What greater insult could there possibly be?”

“You... Wait. Considering how oddly obedient you’ve been acting toward the Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain, you can’t be... You were plotting revenge on God and Diablo?!”

“Wait, you were?”

The Kaiser gnashed his fangs in comprehension, and Kaito let out an unsuitably plain interjection as he stared at Vlad’s back. Vlad puffed up his chest magnificently.

“Quite! All this, all that I’ve done, has been for the sole purpose of obstructing God and Diablo and returning them to the nether! My dear successor’s resolve just so happened to be convenient for carrying out my revenge, and fitting to boot! Go on, now, roar! Rage, seethe, madden! Those feelings are the sole fruit of the humiliation I supped on!”

“Carrying out an act of personal revenge when faced with the end of days? Are you daft?”

“Heeeee’s a dumb-ass.”

Kaito was in no position to talk. In fact, he was by far the more foolish of the two. He himself was aware of that fact. But Vlad’s tone was just so proud that he couldn’t help but get in a quip. Not disheartened in the slightest by their assessments, Vlad went on.

“Oh, a fool I am, but none the worse for it! Our world is a farce, after all, not a tragedy! I was unwittingly cast as an actor, and once my precious daughter was snatched from me, my own death was reduced to a mere opening act! It stands to reason that such a stage would make a buffoon of its star, no?”

“You’re the same as ever, I see. The way you think is entirely deviant from the norm.”

“And Kaiser, as the apex of what man’s hands can reach, as a supreme hound, and yet as a demon who could no longer escape his master’s influence—as you are now, surely you understand this thing we call hatred.”

“Hmph.”

“Whose neck should you truly be turning it on? Fruitlessly gnawing away at an unkillable man is hardly enough to satisfy you, is it?”

The Kaiser offered no response. Instead, he chose silence.

The sounds from the battle down below echoed on. Up in the air, though, it was impossibly quiet. It was as though they had been completely cut off from the world. However, that, too, came to an end.

Vlad opened his mouth to speak again. When he did, his tone was deadly serious.

“The proud should remain proud until the bitter end. For my sake, cast aside your anguish and wear your arrogance freely.”

“...”

“It wouldn’t do for the Kaiser to disappoint a mere human.”

The Kaiser didn’t move. Vlad, too, stood still. Eventually, the Kaiser snapped his tail.

Seeming wholly displeased, he spat out his words.

“Go, O unworthy master of mine.”

“Kaiser...”

“It’s true. Gnashing at that madness of yours would accomplish nothing. So go, before I change my mind. O ye who bestowed hatred upon me. Know that to the end, your twisted mind remained clear.”

Kaito gave a brief nod, then started making his way forward. For a second, though, he stopped. He turned and looked back. Vlad was still standing beside the Kaiser.

Vlad gently waved his right arm, which hadn’t yet finished regenerating. He called out in an innocent tone.

“Farewell, my lord, my dear successor—my son.”

Just this once, Kaito chose to allow Vlad to call him that.

For some reason, Vlad was smiling. A strangely childlike smile was spread across his face.

“Thanks to you, I enjoyed every one of my days.”

“Is that...so?”

There were no lies or falsehoods in his words. Vlad was just indicating his gratitude as honestly as he could.

And because that was the case, Kaito snapped his fingers. At this point, he didn’t need the ability to convert pain into mana anymore. He unilaterally dissolved his contract with the currently inattentive Kaiser. The black beast’s figure nearly vanished from existence. Right before he did, though, Kaito bound his knot to Vlad. Upon receiving the new contract, Vlad widened his eyes.

“My oh my, I suppose that means the Kaiser has now truly lost his reason to stop you, but... Are you sure about this, my lord? Do you truly think I won’t terrorize humanity?”

“Don’t forget about that self-destruct device I planted in your head.”

After whispering in a deep voice, Kaito turned around for good this time. Leaving behind his black army—in a sense, the only subordinates who’d followed him this far—he advanced alone. He didn’t turn back.

As he faced forward, though, he gave his hand a gentle wave.

“Bye, Vlad. At the end of the day, it was you who turned Elisabeth into the Torture Princess and gave rise to the reconstruction sect. I can’t forgive you for that...but you did make my days pretty fun, too.”

“Good heavens, will his rebellious phase never end?”

Vlad let out an exasperated moan. In all likelihood, he was shrugging. But Kaito didn’t look his way. This time, he flew straight ahead.

Not toward the Diablo pillar.

But to the God pillar beside it.



“S-Sir Kaito!”

“That’s the wrong one!”

The voices came from the ice, far down below.

Izabella and Lute let out cries of dismay in unison. Even though they’d been absorbed in their own battles, Kaito’s flight path had caught their attention. After all, Kaito Sena was the Mad King, as well a servant of Elisabeth, the Diablo pillar’s core. He was so dangerous, he might well destroy the whole world in pursuit of his objective.

And for some reason, instead of going to the Diablo pillar, he was heading for the God pillar beside it.

We should stop him... No, but how—?!

Lute ground his fangs. At the moment, Kaito Sena had reached the pinnacle of magecraft. He was standing atop a summit so high that no one else could stand in his way. He had perhaps even surpassed the Saint in her heyday. Thinking he needed to at least try, Lute opened his mouth and got ready to convey the situation and his orders to the demi-human cannoneers and the beastfolk archers. At that moment, though, almost like he’d sensed Lute’s bewilderment...

...Kaito Sena suddenly looked down.

Ah...

Upon seeing his face, Lute remembered something.

Now that they were in the game’s final turns, it finally came back to him.

I’d...forgotten...

“But I’m fine... I’m still me, after all.”

It was a scene from back at the World Tree. Lute’s wife, Ain, had asked Kaito a question, and that had been his response.

Then Kaito had given her an awkward smile. Upon seeing his face, Lute had secretly felt a tinge of relief.

After all, that good-hearted expression had definitely been Kaito Sena’s.

At that moment, a strong thought had suddenly crossed Lute’s mind.

Perhaps... Perhaps he ought to make sure to remember that smile.

It would be best if he made sure to remember it, no matter what happened.

He hadn't quite known why, but he'd been certain of that.

And yet I...

Why had he forgotten? Why hadn't he called out to Kaito? Why hadn't he talked to him? Had he been overwhelmed by the sheer power commanded by that boy who'd become the Mad King? That was hardly a decent excuse.

And just a short while ago, he'd even gotten a chance to remember.

"Take care, Lute! And try not to get hurt, or you'll make your wife sad!"

Those hadn't been the words of a man planning on forsaking the world.

How could I have forgotten?! And that's not all; I...I forgot oh-so-many things!

Lute howled internally, his thoughts racing. That expression Kaito had made hadn't been the only thing to slip his mind.

He'd forgotten who Kaito Sena was by nature.

Lute thought back over the information he'd once checked in the beastfolk lands. Kaito Sena came from another world, one where he'd been abused and eventually killed. Then the Torture Princess had summoned him as an Unsullied Soul to act as her servant.

Originally, Kaito had been nothing but a powerless boy, a tragic child victimized without anyone to protect him. In this world, there were many his age who lived and worked as adults. However, he was different. And there certainly wasn't anyone as young as he who had scraped away at their own limits for the sake of the world like he had.

Yet somehow, everyone had forgotten that simple fact.

Not a single one of the adults who were supposed to be protecting the world had remembered.

"Sir Kaito!"

"Sir Kaito Sena, you mustn't!"

As Lute shouted out to him, so did Izabella. Startled, Lute glanced to his side. Her half-mechanized face had sternly stiffened. In all likelihood, she'd come to the same realization Lute had.

They had collectively placed the burden of the entire world on the back of a single boy.

They were the ones who were soldiers. It should have been their burden to bear.

Kaito Sena offered no reply to their cries of regret.

All he did—

—was smile a vaguely awkward smile.

Then after thinking it over for a moment, Kaito reacted. He waved with big, childlike sweeps. The meaning of that gesture was the same across worlds. And because of that, Lute and the others gasped. Kaito kept frantically waving.

He was saying one word.

“Good-bye.”



The God pillar was swathed in white feathers and red roses. Kaito hovered in the air before it.

Hidden away between the tangled web of briars was a golden princess. She was sleeping, and her body was adorned with the same feathers and roses. Her form resembled that of both Sleeping Beauty and a crucified saint.

As he faced Jeanne de Rais's cruelly bound body, Kaito snapped his fingers. Azure flower petals flashed across his wrists. After transforming his mana, blood and all, he sent it over through Jeanne's lips. As the petals melted in her mouth, she faintly opened her eyes. Kaito nonchalantly raised a hand in greeting.

“Hey, Jeanne. Long time no see.”

“Mis...ter...why...?”

“Sorry, Jeanne. All this time, I've been going on and on about Elisabeth,

Elisabeth, Elisabeth. But I was worried about you, too. And if you don't believe me, then hey, Izabella's been concerned enough about you for both of us. Cut me a little slack, will ya?"

"Are...you...quite...dense...? I'm ask...ing...why... you're...*here*..."

Blood dribbled from Jeanne's mouth as she spoke. Kaito didn't answer her question.

Instead, he spoke as if he were chanting an incantation. His weak smile was still plastered across his face.

"'God desired a contractor so He could maintain His peaceful rest, but He wasn't picky about who that was. As long as there was someone there who wouldn't fall apart the moment the contract was formed, it would be possible to push the burden onto them.' And *'Even though God's supposed to exist to oppose Diablo, it sounds like He's clearly the superior of the two.'* In other words, it's possible to use God's power to keep Diablo in check."

Kaito laid out the information he'd heard from the Saint. Jeanne narrowed her eyes, seemingly unable to understand what he meant. However, Kaito didn't elaborate on his explanation.

He simply snapped his fingers.

All at once, a shower of white surrounded Jeanne as the feathers growing from her body burst off. Countless invisible shackles clattered as they successively came undone. This time, Jeanne widened her eyes in shock.

Her contract with God had been forcibly transferred.

The other party, of course, went without saying.

"Hanged Man, you can't—!"

"You did good, Jeanne. Time for you to go home."

The way Kaito spoke those words, they sounded almost like a normal salutation. White feathers were sprouting from part of his cheek, but he had God's power under control and was keeping his transformation to the bare minimum.

"Izabella, your first love, is waiting for you."

“That ain’t the problem here, you dumb motherfucker!”

In an uncharacteristic gesture, Jeanne frantically extended her hand toward him. But her fingertips met nothing but air.

The briars had released her. The pillar itself was nothing but a husk now, so it had no more need for its sacrifice.

Jeanne began falling. The golden girl descended like a bird struck out of the air. However, a bolt of light hurtled toward her landing point like a meteor. Before Jeanne could hit the ground, Izabella dashed up and caught her.

It was the very image of a knight catching a princess in their arms.

After making sure Jeanne was breathing, Izabella let out a sigh of relief and hugged Jeanne’s wound-riddled body, golden hair and all. Jeanne, comically flustered, was saying something to her.

As he gazed down at them, Kaito murmured in admiration.

“Well, that’s nice... Seems like there’s hope for her yet.”

As he stood on his tiptoes, Kaito gave a pleased nod. Then he grabbed the feathers on his face and wrenched them out by the handful. Blood gushed forth, but he ignored it.

He turned toward the Diablo pillar and headed straight for its briar-enclosed core.

A single woman was sleeping inside it. She had black hair, white skin, crimson eyes, and a radiant beauty.

And she was the person Kaito admired most.

“Good work, Elisabeth. Don’t worry, I’m here now. You’re probably gonna be pissed at me, though.”

He’d once boasted that he’d save the world. That he’d rescue everything.

However, killing Elisabeth Le Fanu was impossible for Kaito Sena.



*

If he couldn't kill her, then...

...that would mean...

At that moment, he gave voice to the sole, unspoken answer.

“Because I'm taking charge of God and Diablo both.”

That was the act of selfishness Kaito Sena had decided on.

He'd take on a burden greater than even the Saint's.

★★★★ Leaked, top-secret documents from the Church—"Regarding the Kaiser" ★★★★★

The Kaiser

The highest-ranked of the fourteen demons summoned by Vlad Le Fanu and his followers. Currently, he is the most powerful entity on record to ever make a contract with a mage and is referred to as "the apex of what man's hands can reach."

Even among mages who have consumed demon flesh, only those blessed with great talent and aptitude can successfully summon him.

At present, he takes the form of a black dog with hellfire burning in his eyes. He can freely alter his size. He can also grow bat-like wings and is capable of flight.

He refers to himself as the supreme hound.

He possesses great pride due to the influence of his summoner but is normally incapable of understanding human emotions.

Words from a Buffoon

While it's true he was influenced by me, one can hardly say we're completely the same.

And if you compare him with the other demons, you'll find he's exceptional in a number of other ways.

Those changes all started when I refused to merge with him after we first formed our contract.

Eventually, anyone who comes down to this lower dimension of ours and obtains flesh, reason, and intellect will be pressed into the mold that is individuality.

Furthermore, he obtained a second contractor.

As a result, he was finally able to comprehend 'hatred.'

Now, I haven't the slightest as to what that implies, but...it really is an amusingly ironic twist.

Demons 'surpass the limits of human imagination,' yet at times, they can come to 'understand humans,' eh?

Why, not even humans can understand one another.



12

Kaito Sena's Story

F r e a m d T o r l o u r c h e n

12

Kaito Sena's Story

It's time for a story.

It's the story of a boy who was brutally killed by another, and a story of a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps it's a story of a child who was abandoned by his parents, and a hero who was abandoned by the world.

Either way, it's a story of admiration and folly.

It's a story of love, but not a story of romance.

Someday, it will likely be remembered as a tale from long, long ago.

A horrible, tragic little anecdote.

One that was far too twisted to pass off as a fairy tale.



Kaito Sena raised his hand, extending it straight toward Elisabeth.

He had no intention of exchanging final words of farewell. After all, what he was doing was nothing more than an act of selfishness. Elisabeth was definitely going to be livid. Because of that, he'd completely cast aside his desire to talk to her.

Instead, he just burned her briar-entwined figure into his eyes. Then he prepared to snap his fingers.

But when he did.

He heard a painfully nostalgic voice.

"Ce...ase...this...non...sense..."

"Wha—?"

Kaito let out an involuntary yelp. The captive before him had moved. Normally, that shouldn't have been possible. Although the pillar was forcibly keeping her alive, she didn't even currently have a heart. In an absurd display of willpower, though, Elisabeth had opened her eyes.

Their piercing, crimson gaze was directed straight at Kaito.

Naturally, he let out a surprised “uh...” Then in his typical disrespectful tone, he spoke: “Geez... Dial down the mental fortitude a bit. Or, like, the resilience.”

“You...fool... 'Tis true, I did...give it to you... I even...told you...to save the world...”

“That you did. You even gave me your heart.”

“But I never...told you to...shoulder...such a— *Khagh!*”

Then Elisabeth coughed. Instead of blood, feathers came pouring from her lungs. As the black feathers fluttered away, she glared at him. Kaito flashed her an awkward smile.

The moment she'd been captured by the pillar, Elisabeth had handed her heart over to him with the following words: *“Drink them down or spit them all up, the choice is yours to make. But do try to live on, Kaito.*

“And when you do, save the world. Your strength is equal to the task, as is your needless determination.

“You are the greatest fool this world has to offer—and you are my dim-witted servant, my pride and joy.”

Her voice had been like someone trying to cheer up a dejected child. However, not once had she asked him to rescue her. Much to the contrary, she was probably planning on waiting there for her death, like a monster who'd bequeathed her sword to a hero.

There was no doubt in his mind that she'd expected him to destroy the Diablo pillar. But she'd been naive.

There had never been any chance that Kaito Sena would do as she wished. Even so, she repeated herself.

The only thing powering her desperate movements was the rage his words

had inspired in her.

“I told...you...did I not? 'Tis a heavy...thing...to shoulder sins...”

The sins of the various races had cultivated a flower, and its blooming was what had brought about this situation. The punishment for their sloth and their ignorance had finally caught up with them. Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. Trying to bear the weight of their original sin on one's own was rash in the extreme.

Also, living forever was too cruel a fate. Not to mention the fact that Kaito was an outsider to this world. He had no obligation to shoulder the sin that had existed since before the dawn of this world.

Elisabeth closed her eyes as if in prayer. Then in a small voice, she continued: “...’Tis too great a burden for you.”

“I can bear it.”

Kaito's response came readily. His voice didn't have an ounce of hesitation in it. Elisabeth's eyes shot open as if she'd been slapped. She looked at Kaito's face. The moment she did, her own face contorted, as though she was on the verge of tears.

She understood. Time's passage was cruel and unfeeling.

Nothing remained the same forever.

“When did you...become able to...make such an...expression, you fool?”

“Honestly, I don't know myself. But because I've changed, there are things I'm able to protect now.”

Kaito's expression wasn't that of the powerless boy he'd once been. It was the calm face of a person filled with resolve. The pain he'd experienced, the countless times he'd died, and the innumerable horrors he'd seen had completely painted over his fear and hopelessness. At this point, no words would make his heart waver.

Elisabeth cast her gaze down. A faint murmur escaped her lips.

“I... This is not what I summoned you to do.”

“...I know.”

“I merely wanted you...to handle my chores.”

“Ah yeah... I never did get the hang of cooking, did I?”

“You did...one unnecessary thing...after another...my dim-witted servant...”

“Yeah, and you’re the only one.”

The only one who’d never called him the Mad King.

And with that, Kaito nodded. He snapped his fingers, and his chest and ribs tore open. Chunks of flesh went flying off into space. His rib cage was in full bloom. A pulsating organ appeared from within.

The organ transformed into crimson flower petals, then leaped into Elisabeth’s mouth.

Her heart had returned to its rightful place.

“I’m giving it back.”

“...!”

Kaito’s body didn’t require a heart anymore. Such was the realm he now stood in.

Elisabeth shuddered at that fact. As he was now, he was a fitting vessel to bear both God and Diablo. But...

...he was still Kaito Sena.

He was just Kaito Sena. He’d completely changed, but he was still her same dull, kindhearted, foolish servant as ever. Yet he spoke in the voice of a grizzled veteran.

“Thank you, Elisabeth.”

“What do you intend to do about your promise?!”

Suddenly, Elisabeth let out an articulate shout. She turned up her downcast face. She hadn’t been crying. She glared at Kaito with eyes full of anger and indignation.

“You told me, did you not?! You said you would remain by my side! You and

you alone!”

“And hey, you bringing me back to life and summoning me here must have been some kind of fate... So until you start walking the road to Hell, I’ll try and stick by your side for as long as I can, even if I’m the only one.”

It was a promise the two of them had exchanged long ago.

Kaito had sworn it to her back in her castle, right after they’d finished subjugating the Kaiser.

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu’s bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.

Kaito thought that sounded just fine.

Neither of them had mentioned the promise out loud. But both of them knew.

They both knew the other had thought it.

“Don’t worry, I plan on keeping it.”

Kaito spoke with complete composure. Elisabeth opened her mouth, as though to say, *How? How do you intend on keeping it?* But as she did, she suddenly realized the foolishness of the question she was about to ask.

After the last rebuilding, the Saint had slumbered away inside a crystal.

One who had taken that burden upon themselves lost the ability to die.

For the full span of Elisabeth Le Fanu’s bloody life— —that foolish servant of hers would never leave.

“YOUUUUUUUUU IDIOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOT!”

“Elisabeth. This foolish servant of yours will be by your side to the very end.”

Elisabeth extended a trembling arm. Kaito held his hand aloft. The Torture Princess struggled, trying desperately to grasp at his distant palm. But briars rose up one after another to stop her.

Her already-broken fingers tore even further. She retched up blood. Yet just as she once had, she continued resisting.

However, Kaito's figure remained distant.

A smile crossed his face, and he got ready to snap his fingers.

But suddenly, as if he'd just thought of something, he opened his mouth and spoke: "That reminds me—I told you once in a dream, but...I never said it to you in real life."

"What is it...? What...is it...?"

"I love you, Elisabeth."

His words pierced her like a long sword.

There was a brutal, kind truth to them.

Heartbroken, Elisabeth stared at Kaito. She studied his face.

He was smiling like a child—

—his eyes still glittering as though gazing upon a revered hero.



“For your sake, I could do or become anything.”

“—You can’t! You mustn’t!”

Elisabeth tried to scream. But Kaito wasn’t listening anymore. He hadn’t been looking to coerce a response out of her; he’d merely said what he wanted to say. He gently waved his other hand at her.

“Good-bye, Elisabeth.”

“‘Twould be far better it were—”

And without hearing her shout— “‘Twould be far better it were I—”

—Kaito Sena snapped his fingers.



Countless invisible shackles clattered as they successively came undone.

The ebony princess fell, as though she’d been struck by an arrow.

She’d been extending her hand until the very end.

She tried to shout something. Diamond-like tears glistened as they descended through the air.

Lute successfully managed to catch her. As he watched over her, Kaito let out a quiet murmur.

“...It’s unusual to see you cry, Elisabeth.”

For some reason, she started struggling. As he gazed down at her, another faint smile crossed Kaito’s face. However, smiling naturally like that was now beyond him. Black feathers had sprouted from his cheek. He immediately grabbed them and ripped them out. The twin powers of rebirth and destruction were whirling within him. A detached thought crossed his mind.

Summoning God without the proper conditions having been met would have been hard, even for me. But now, given that the summoning’s already completed, using His power in ways God Himself wants me to is pretty doable.

At the moment, two inhuman emotions were bubbling up inside him. One was a fierce desire to destroy everything and swallow it all up. To put it in

human terms, it resembled hunger. The other was a fierce determination to confine the destruction. To put it in human terms, it was like a sense of obligation. Kaito intentionally chose to amplify the latter. Little by little, Diablo's power began settling down.

The underlings' cries stopped. A silence returned to the world below, one it had nearly forgotten.

And at the same time, it began.

A clear snapping noise rang out.

"Yeah...I figured."

The day of rebuilding was far in the future, so God was returning to His slumber. The Saint had been encased in a crystal.

Now the same thing was happening to Kaito. A transparent layer had begun surrounding his still-living body. The snapping noise continued. Kaito murmured to himself.

"Looks like it's over, huh...? I guess I did it."

He quietly raised his arm. Azure petals and black darkness whirled atop his palm, and he drew a jet-black long sword from within them. The runes inscribed on its slender blade flashed, and he affirmed their meaning.

All things are pardoned unto me. But I am ruled by none.

"La (your job is done)."

The moment Kaito whispered, cracks ran across the blade. Then Nameless, the sword without a name that was birthed from the wish to save a single woman, shattered completely.

At the same time, Kaito's uniform transformed as well. At times, clothes made by magic could change based on their owner's influence. As the nature of Kaito's volition and magic shifted away from battle, so, too, did his outfit.

Its end state was that of the butler uniform he'd constantly decried as unbecoming. He'd completed his transformation back into a foolish servant.

Kaito slowly exhaled, then closed his eyes. The Mad King had appeared like a

tempest and had vanished just as suddenly. And the massive amounts of mana he'd obtained knew that as well. There was truly nothing left that he needed to do.

He'd completed everything that he'd set out to. And so Kaito Sena got to thinking.

Specifically, it was during the time right before his body was fully enclosed.

Hypothetically, if Elisabeth hadn't summoned me, what would have become of me?

He certainly wouldn't have had to repeatedly experience the pain of death. He wouldn't have seen all those horrible, gruesome things he'd seen, either. However, he also would have gone his whole life without ever having been glad he was alive.

Then like an empty bowl being filled with water—

—memories of the various things he'd experienced in this new world swirled within his mind.

The Torture Princess, laughing innocently. And tumbling toward the ground while shedding tears like diamonds.

Hina, smiling gently. And drifting peacefully in and out of sleep atop a warm bed.

The Butcher. Izabella. Jeanne. Lute. Ain. Vyade.

All the people he'd met, all the expressions they'd made, and all the things they'd said to him.

They had all been there—

—and Kaito had lived within each of them.

And Kaito hadn't forgotten the words Neue had said to him as he'd stood on death's door.

"I guess...I was just hoping you could find happiness in this world."

Even now, I'm still not totally sure what happiness is supposed to look like. But there's one thing I do know.

The first time he'd wept with joy at having been born— —his death had gained meaning for the very first time.

And even if he'd ended up under the same curse the Butcher had been bound by— —no matter how foolish the decision had been, Kaito didn't regret it at all.

He had no regrets.

If he had but one, though...

CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!

A crisp noise rang out as the crystal shattered. Somebody had used all their might to rip open part of the film surrounding him. Of course, it would quickly reform. Who would have done such a silly thing? And why?

Flustered, Kaito turned around. Outside the gap in the crystal, he could see a black spot in the sky. It was the Kaiser. It was unclear what he'd come for, but he was wordlessly beating his wings. However, the reason for his arrival soon became clear.

The Kaiser had been carrying someone.

"MASTER KAITO!"

Kaito's bride was before his very eyes.

His beloved bride had flown up to meet him.

"Hi...na—"

"You did as you pleased, Master Kaito, and now I intend to do the same!"

Her maid uniform fluttering, Hina beamed. She had already cast aside the halberd she'd used to break the crystal. She was simply reaching out her arms. She embraced him, as any would a deeply loved one.

"I won't let you be alone."

"Hina—"

"After all, we're a family."

Her smile was as radiant as a flower in bloom.

Kaito trembled in surprise. He knew. He had to hurry.

The crystal's opening still hadn't closed yet. If he shoved Hina away, he could still make it in time. He couldn't drag her into this. He needed to let her be free. With that thought in mind, he reached out his arms.

And with all his strength—

—he hugged his wife tight.

Holding your beloved in your arms. That had to be one of the purest forms that happiness came in, Kaito Sena mused.

She's warm, she's lovely, and I don't want to let go of her. For if we separate, I will surely die.

And he was certain she felt the same way.

Kaito Sena was terrifyingly free of regrets.

If he had but one regret, though...

...it was in regard to his bride.

And thus, Kaito now turned to his wife with a teary smile on his face.

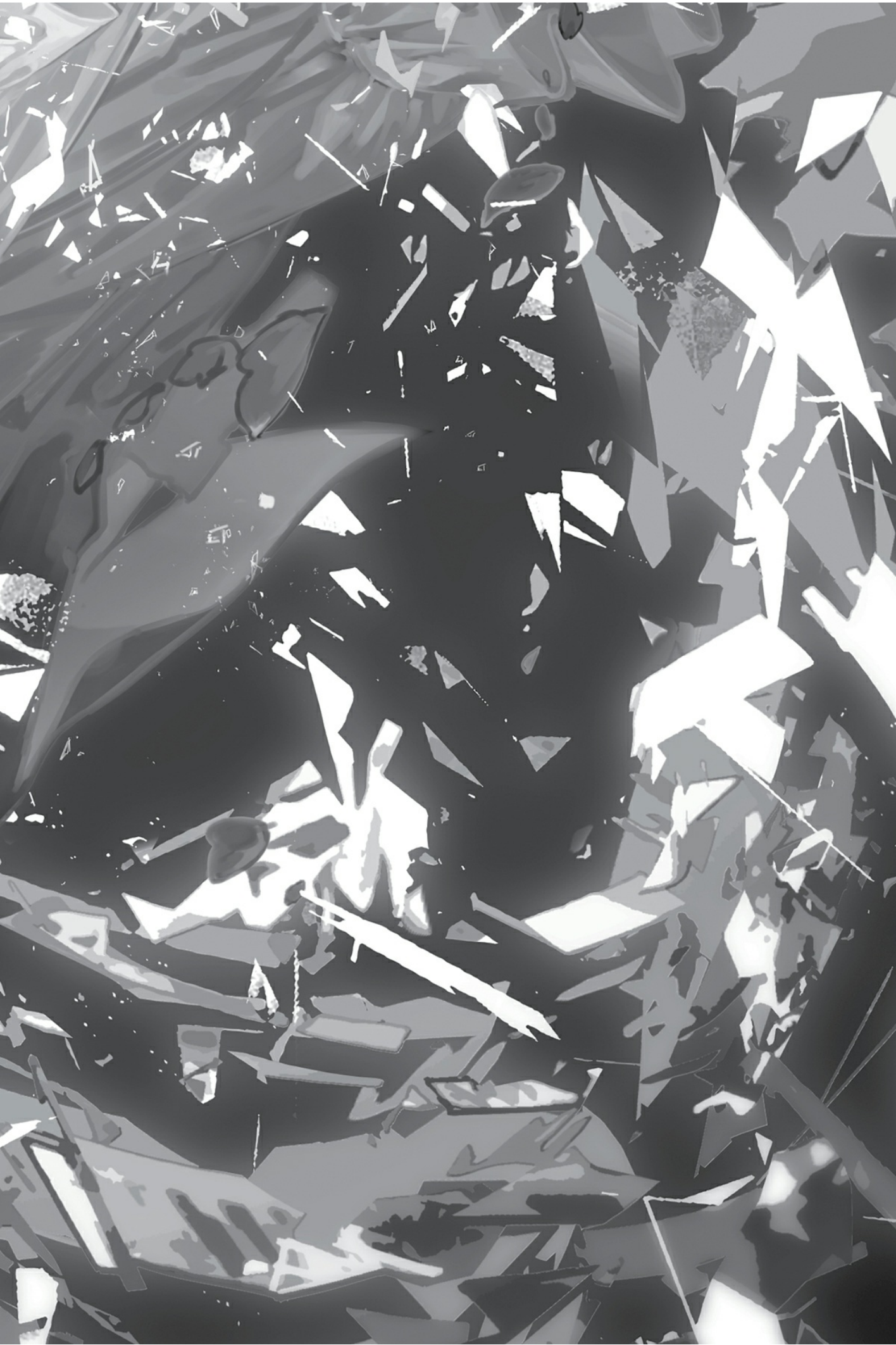
"Hina...will you stay with me forever?"

"Yes, gladly. In sickness and in health, till death do us part. I shall be by your side forevermore!"

They pressed their lips together, as resolutely as when they'd exchanged their vows.

Then they smiled at each other like always. Kaito hugged Hina tight. The crystal snapped and popped as it closed up. Their bodies were steadily being surrounded. As they rubbed their cheeks affectionately against each other, Hina whispered:





“Master Kaito, I’m very, very happy right now.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Their field of view gradually shrank and shrank. They were being cut off from the outside world.

Despite the unfathomable pain and pressure invading his body, Kaito Sena whispered from the bottom of his heart as well.

“I’m so glad...that I was born.”

And then with a snap— —the crystal sealed completely.

◆◆◆◆ Kaito Sena's Diary

It's weird—the sky looks clear in some places, but in others, it's full of black clouds and underlings. It's...cold, I guess?
As far as demon battles go...it kinda feels like this is the big one?

A bunch of stuff ended up happening, and Hina gave me this diary, so I thought I'd write an entry.

Honestly, I had no idea that Elisabeth, the Butcher, and Jeanne had gone and written in it after Hina had taken a break. The fact that it's my turn makes me feel weirdly self-conscious. I can really empathize with the passage the Butcher wrote: "At the very least, I hope that my acquaintances will be able to keep smiling for as long as possible."

He betrayed everyone. But knowing that, I can tell he wrote that section from the heart. When I read Jeanne's entry, I can tell she was thinking about Izabella in her own way, even back then. And Elisabeth... When she was writing that entry, she was probably seriously planning on getting executed.

"I shall return Kaito to you in good spirits," she wrote.

Come back in good spirits yourself, dammit.

Man, now that I think about it, this entry of mine has been kind of all over the place. Anyone reading it for the first time probably won't be able to make heads or tails of it. I mean, can you even call something like this a diary entry?

But to be honest, I think that's fine.

There's just one thing I want whoever reads this to remember.

I was here.

Everyone important to me was here.

Please don't forget that.

No matter what happens after this.

Today's menu Honey, nuts, and cheese on crackers, as well as an herb salad and some wine

Elisabeth's reaction Here's to her being able to drink wine like this again

Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant You know, I feel like we could have done without this header

Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant 2 It used to be "Today's Master Kaito," but someone went and changed it

And with that, maybe it's time I finished up this diary entry.

In a few hours, morning will be here, whether I want it to or not.

When someone eventually reads this, I'll probably be gone for good.

Will the two of you ever see this, I wonder?

If you do, I want you to know something.

I love you both.

From the bottom of my heart.

Epilogue



Epilogue

Two pillars stood atop the World's End. Feathers, white and black, and roses, azure and crimson, fluttered down from them onto the frozen earth. They cascaded below like beautiful drops of rain and flakes of snow.

At that florid scene's center, a massive crystal was enshrined between the two pillars.

Two humans were sleeping inside it. Or to be more precise, one was from another world, and the other was an automaton.

The two were nestled up close to each other, and their faces looked downright blissful.

They were like a symbol of all the joy the world had to offer.

The soldiers gazed dumbfoundedly at the crystal. The power that had threatened to destroy the world was gone, and all the underlings had turned to ash. The burning-black sky, too, had reclaimed its original milky-white, rainbow hue. The snowflakes drifting to the ground were clear and pure.

Amid all that, the soldiers had come to realize something.

Something about the person whom they'd all relied on yet had borne fear and bloodlust toward behind their smiles.

Something about the Mad King, the man they'd feared they would need to kill someday.

"...Was he always such a frail-looking boy?"

He was nothing more than a thin little man.

Still holding Jeanne, Izabella looked down. Vlad was still smiling. Lute struck the ground and let out a wordless roar. Valisisa spat on the ground.

And there was one woman who sat down in front of the crystal.

Her lustrous, black hair fluttered in the wind as she gazed at its two sleeping inhabitants.

Nobody moved to approach her. Eventually, though, La Christoph came up behind her.

Blood was flowing from his still-open rib cage. However, there was no pain in his voice as he made his solemn statement.

“This world has sustained a grave blow. Humanity has no leeway, and the Church’s authority has crumbled. I have no intention of committing the folly of killing someone as useful as you. Your execution is hereby permanently deferred, Elisabeth Le Fanu. That is the least we can do to repay the debt we owe that stranger.”

“Is that...so?”

“Before the day of your death, try to do some good at least.”

With that, La Christoph closed his mouth and turned. Then he left to go help treat the wounded.

Elisabeth remained silent. Suddenly, though, she moved. She extended her arm and touched the crystal. She pressed her hand firmly against its transparent surface. However, she was unable to make her way inside.

As she gazed at their two resting figures, she let out a small whisper.

“Hina... Perhaps this is the best for you. ’Tis a good thing, I suppose, that no tears need come your way... Aye, perhaps ’tis the best for both of you. And perhaps living alone is yet another of my punishments. No, as you said, I suppose I’m not alone.”

“Elisabeth. This foolish servant of yours will be by your side to the very end.”

Elisabeth thought back on the words she herself had been told. She curled her lips upward, just a hair.

She knocked her forehead against the crystal.

“You fool... You complete and utter fool.”

No voice rose up in reply. Nothing came back to her.

Even so, she wore a smile as she spoke:

“’Tis true—no matter how much time passes, you shall always be my foolish servant.”

Feathers, white and black, and roses, azure and crimson, rained down on her incessantly.

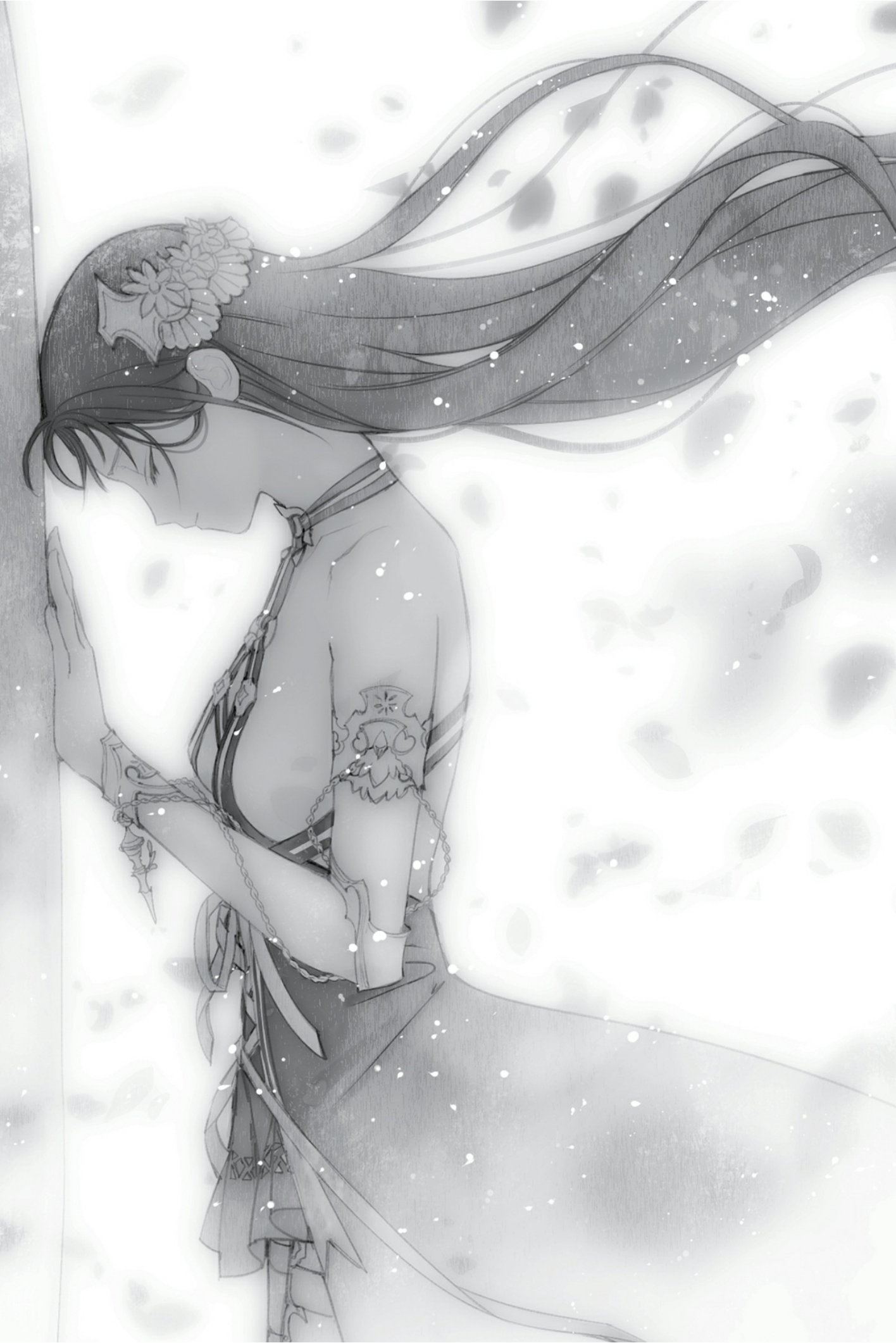
They rained down over the world, as if to congratulate it for its survival.

And with that, Kaito Sena’s story came to an end.

It was a tale from long, long ago.

A tale of admiration, folly—

—and love.



Afterword

Winter's cold wave has given way, and spring is upon us.

And with it, Volume 6 has been released. Truly, an auspicious season.

Thank you all so much for buying the sixth volume of *Torture Princess*.

In regard to how I'm arranging this afterword, I thought I'd lead with the acknowledgments this time. To Saki Ukai, for these six volumes of wonderful illustrations; to my editor O, for putting up with all the trouble I've caused you; and to Hina Yamato, for the two volumes of the manga adaptation, I would like to thank you all so much. I'd also like to extend deep thanks to everyone else involved in the process, as well as my beloved family, particularly my sister. And more than anything, I would like to express my gratitude to my readers once more. The curtain has finally closed on Kaito Sena's story. Thank you all so much for accompanying me on his journey. I was able to write almost everything about him that I wanted to, a fact that fills me with emotion.

As for *Torture Princess* as a whole, it will continue.

It will continue. (That part's important.) To tell you the truth, after I submitted my plot outline for Volume 6, my editor mentioned it would make for a good stopping point, so if I absolutely wanted to end the series there, I could. But I still had various things I wanted to write about her and her acquaintances, and about this event and that event, and the various characters doing this, that, and the other thing, so I asked to be allowed to continue writing.

Since then, I've submitted my whole outline for the plot to come, and I got my editor's seal of approval. The content and pace should be just about the same as it has been up until now, so I hope that news brings you all some relief. However, if you want to just close the book here and call that the end, that's a perfectly valid choice, and this would be the volume to do it. As an author, though, it would bring me utmost joy if you were to come along with me, watch

over the characters, and see the fate of this world until the true end. I intend to keep writing to the best of my ability, so I hope you'll join me.

Please, I beg of you.

The story up until now has been for *his* sake.

From now on, though, it will become a story for the other protagonist's sake —for *her* sake.

And as long as the story continues, there's one thing I feel I must say.

The true hell—

—has only just begun.

F r e m d T o r t o r c h e n

**Part 1—The Foolish Servant Arc
The End**

Part 2—
The Torture Princess Arc
Prologue

F r e a m d T o r t u r e c h a n



Part 2—The Torture Princess Arc Prologue

The red sun had just sunk in the sky, and darkness was beginning to overtake the area.

A single figure was running through the night.

It was a man, clad in a dark mage's stereotypical droopy hood. He was frequently glancing about as he ran. It seemed the magical traps he'd been laying about had completed their tasks, as he didn't see any sign of his pursuers. Certain he'd successfully made another escape, he breathed a sigh of relief. That caused him to let his guard down.

A slender figure fell on him from above.

Someone had descended like an arrow from the rooftops, mercilessly landing on him high-heels-first. Although he narrowly avoided having his neck broken, he let out an ugly scream when his attacker trampled on his stomach. The voice that rang out was as cold and as sharp as a knife.

"Squealing like a pig is unbecoming. 'Twas obvious your crimes would catch up with you. So why did you think you could escape me? 'Tis precisely what's so irksome about you weaklings who fail to grasp the difference in strength between you and your superiors."

The man frantically looked up at his foe. Her resplendent, black hair glittered in the moonlight, and her skin, which her risqué bondage dress laid bare, was captivatingly awash in the light as well. The man let out a cry filled with awe and despair.

"E-Elisabeth!"

"Precisely. I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu."

A sadistic smile spread across the beautiful woman's face.

As she pressed her foot down on the man, she made her bold declaration.

“I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow.”



“I caaught him.”

“Excellent work!”

As she made her listless announcement, Elisabeth kicked the bound mage forward. The beastfolk replied with their thanks as they approached their captured foe. A deer-headed soldier dragged him down to the dungeons.

Elisabeth rotated her shoulders in exasperation. Lute walked up to her and handed her a hot cup of tea.

“I would expect nothing less. With this, we can strike another name off the most wanted list. He gave us the slip when we busted up the last demon-worshipper site, you see, and sniffing him out was beyond us.”

“Well, the blame for that hardly rests with you. I was conveniently able to trace his traps back to him, but...such a trick can only be performed if one possesses a proper grasp of magic. Anyhow, that’s all, correct? I shall be taking my break now. And my dinner, albeit a late one.”

“Oh, Ms. New Captain! We’re getting off, too, so if you don’t mind, we could eat together— Hwah!”

The new recruit, with his characteristic notched ear, let out a jovial remark. However, Lute immediately snatched him up by the nape of his uniform. The legs of the coyote-headed recruit dangled.

Lute shook his head, as though instructing him not to get in her way. The recruit didn’t seem to understand, but he obediently went quiet. Elisabeth drank down her tea as though nothing had happened.

After giving the cup back to Lute, she began walking. The moment she did, though, the door was violently kicked open.

The voice that rang out seemed somehow puppetlike, yet at the same time, it was strangely obnoxious.

“Pardon me. Elisabeth! Is Elisabeth Le Fanu around? **Listen to what I gotta say for a minute, ya bitch!**”

“Ah. ’Tis Jeanne... I see you’ve made your way here from the Capital again. When you leave, I do expect you to mend the door on your way out. How many times does this make, anyhow?”

“Don’t worry about that; just listen. I don’t understand what’s going on in my little lady’s head. On some days, she’s kind to me, and on others, she seems wholly uninterested. Why, today and yesterday, she barely even greeted me. **Women, I’m tellin’ ya! Like, does she hate me? She doesn’t hate me, does she?**”

“The way I’d heard it, Izabella’s been up to her ears in work since yesterday. And besides, she’s never been much of a clingy type. I’m off now. Good-bye.”

Waving her hand in exasperation, Elisabeth grabbed the basket from the table. Jeanne seemed to be on the verge of launching into another tirade, but Lute signaled to Elisabeth with his eyes that he could take it from there. She left the room.

Then after successfully escaping into the hallway, she dropped a jewel onto the floor. It was a magical device she’d created by taking a gem already rich in mana, then carving spells and pouring blood into it. The moment it landed, a teleportation circle appeared on the ground. Crimson flower petals and darkness sprayed up as far as the eye could see.

Cylindrical walls the color of fresh blood formed around her. Then fine cracks ran across them.

Once the circle had vanished, nobody remained within.

Thus, Elisabeth vanished from the beastfolk lands.



She arrived in a place that had neither day nor night.

Elisabeth surveyed the pure land crafted from snow, water, wind, and mana. Above her was a milky-white sky blanketed in a rainbow-colored film. Neither the sun nor the moon was visible. Everything around her was beautiful and empty.

The delicate snowflakes crunched under her feet as she walked.

Eventually, she arrived at a strange sight.

There were two pillars of ivy toppled over, like corpses of giants.

The two of them were lying on top of each other and propping each other up. Because of that, there was a shrine-like cave at their center. She boldly sat down in it, surrounded by ivy decorated with azure and crimson roses.

While magically maintaining her body's temperature, she opened up her basket. Inside it were a variety of sandwiches packed with fruits, vegetables, and meats. She nodded as she glanced fondly at them.

Normally, the beastfolk preferred mild flavors. Compared with the dishes in the early days, though, Elisabeth's meal was seasoned fairly heavily, and the serving size had gone up as well. She gestured at it and spoke:

"Behold this transformation. And I uttered nary a complaint. Kind, isn't he? 'Tis little wonder you all got along so handsomely."

Her tone seemed to indicate she was talking to someone. However, there was no response.

As she imagined Lute going out of his way to pop into the kitchen, Elisabeth began eating her sandwiches. As she did, she snapped the fingers on her free hand and retrieved the personal documents she'd been secretly keeping. She went over her recent thoughts.

"Little has changed from the information I reported previously. No incidents of note have occurred, at any rate... Ah, but there is some good news. Although they yet continue, the mixed-race murders have subsided dramatically over the last year. 'Tis a natural result of the situation calming down, but still. That said, there is something strange that's caught my attention about the way it's subsided. The result itself is auspicious, but I shall have to analyze it later. Now, as for today..."

The way she was talking really did make it seem like there was someone else there. However, the only reply she received was silence.

At Vyade's suggestion, she was working under Lute's command to preserve the public order. The world's wounds were deep, and the new way people perceived God and Diablo had given rise to a number of new catastrophes. The

reconstruction sect had scattered across the land and acquired greater influence, and demon worshippers had begun running rampant.

The Torture Princess's job was to operate behind the scenes and bring them to justice. However, there was no shortage of paladins and other humans who refused to accept her, so she was working out in the beastfolk lands.

The soldiers who'd survived Ragnarok seemed to carry a certain sense of guilt, and they were generally kind to her. And the new recruits held a great deal of admiration toward the actions she and her servant had taken, so they tended to approach her with a degree of familiarity as well.

It was, all things considered, not entirely unpleasant. However, Elisabeth did her best to keep to herself.

In order to best protect the world, 'tis best to avoid nurturing new bonds.

There was no way of knowing whom or what she would eventually have to sacrifice. And there was also the possibility that everyone would eventually find themselves needing to kill the Torture Princess.

Such were Elisabeth's concerns. For the moment, though, unstable as the world was, things were peaceful. She secretly found that miraculous fact quite pleasing.

After all, this ugly, selfish world was the very one *he'd* chosen to protect.

"Now then, I suppose dinner's over. 'Twas a fine meal, but...surely, not a dish exists in this world that compares to the ones you made, Hina."

Elisabeth quietly murmured, but after a moment, she shook her head and withdrew the thermos from her basket. She heartily drank down its contents.

Suddenly, she let her body go limp. A small *thump* rang out as her back collided with something.

As she leaned against the transparent crystal, Elisabeth quietly closed her eyes.

Two people were sleeping inside the crystal at her back.

They were as silent as ever, and unchanging smiles adorned their faces.

Elisabeth remained facing forward. She refused to look back. However, because nobody was listening, a few words suddenly fell from her mouth.

Her words were like a drop of blood, shed straight from the heart.

“...I wish I could see you.”

Of course, from within the crystal, Kaito and Hina offered no answer.

It had been three years since that fateful battle.



“You can see them; you can!”

The voice that echoed through the castle sounded like a bell ringing.

As she heard those words, which seemed almost to be a response to the murmur she’d made a while back, and gazed at the scene spread out before her, Elisabeth narrowed her eyes.

What had happened? For a moment, she wasn’t totally sure.

Over the past three years, Vyade had moved back from her secondary residence to her original home. The lighting throughout its entire audience chamber was dim. Furthermore, the room’s daintily embroidered curtains cast whimsical shadows atop the stairs leading up to the throne. The curtains’ large, floral design was gorgeous, yet they possessed the same solemnity as a large, aging beast. The room seemed undefended at first glance, but a number of skilled soldiers were hidden away in its nooks and crannies. Or at least, they were supposed to be. Now, though, not a single one of them seemed to be present.

Lute and the others standing behind her hadn’t noticed yet, but Elisabeth could tell.

They’ve all been knocked out already.

Earlier that day, Valisisa had come to visit Vyade. The first imperial princess had been busy pursuing a group of reconstruction-sect members who’d gotten their hands on some surviving transfigured paladins, but she’d gotten back a few days prior. The way Valisisa had ordered Elisabeth, Lute, and the others to come greet her as well had been haughty, yet friendly at the same time. That

was what they'd been on their way to the audience chamber to do.

However, the room they'd been heading toward was steeped in the scent of blood.

Elisabeth glanced around the room with her crimson eyes.

Within, the worst possible result was awaiting them. Two beastfolk lay toppled over.

Sitting motionless in the throne was a white wolf with her head drooping low. Atop her was a red fox who was dressed in a military uniform and looked like she'd moved to cover the wolf. Their red and white fur was matted thick with blood.

And standing before the two imperial princesses of the beastfolk were two humans.

The lovely voice from before had come from one of them, and as for the other—

“The true value of information lies in its ability to set people's minds in motion.”

The man began speaking in a detached tone. He was tall and possessed a distinct sort of melancholy. Although he was attractive, the bottom part of his face was concealed behind a crow mask. Wearing just half of a mask was a rather strange choice. The rest of his body was garbed in a thick, black outfit. Curiously, it made him look almost like a doctor or a researcher.

For some reason, instead of fleeing, he chose to begin making a speech in the bloodstained room.

“Moving, how the three races managed to come together for a common goal. But the information that was shared among them and subsequently leaked can be described as nothing but a gross error. The possibility of people appearing from other worlds and the details regarding demon flesh, in particular, should have been concealed. Now everyone knows that by summoning from another world a soul that's accustomed to pain, placing it in an immortal body, making it form a contract with a demon, and giving it the heart of an individual who's ingested demon flesh and accumulated a massive amount of pain, it's possible

to artificially create an entity capable of revolutionizing the world.”

His voice was just as heavy and gloomy as his melancholy appearance would imply.

Lute and the others were still stunned. The man’s speech, which had been wholly inappropriate for the time and place, had only served to exacerbate that. However, Elisabeth knew exactly what he was talking about. She clicked her tongue.

The possibility of people appearing from other worlds and the details regarding demon flesh.

That was, without a doubt, one of the things she’d been afraid of.

But how would someone arrive at that thought before the information faded from memory?!

Only someone who reared hell within their mind the way Vlad did should have been able to notice that fact. Furthermore, Elisabeth had feared even that faint possibility and had taken steps to prevent it. However, the man spoke to no one in particular.

“It may seem trivial, but in truth, the fact that this person comes from another world is surprisingly crucial. The people of this world don’t realize it themselves, but their imaginations are narrow, causing their potential to be limited. One would have to destroy their very ego to escape the shackles they themselves are unaware of. However, people from other worlds are different. *I died, but I got a second chance at life. This time, I’m going to accomplish everything I set out to do.* That conception serves as an almighty justification. It gives them that magical quality that allows them to obtain limitless power.”

“But you need the First Demon’s flesh for that, and I made certain to retrieve it all! It should no longer be possible to obtain meat from a demon that powerful!”

Elisabeth let out a shout. The man nodded magnanimously, as though congratulating her.

“An apt measure. That was what posed the largest problem for me. You all put down the reconstruction-sect members who’d carried off the meat before I

could get to them. An impressive display. However, that was where another piece of information became crucial. Specifically, the records from the battle at the Capital—in particular, the ones regarding demon crossbreeding.”

Elisabeth’s eyes shot open. That was a piece of information that not only she, but everyone had overlooked.

After their egos were destroyed, two demonic contractors were able to have a powerful child within their fused mass of flesh. It had been exceedingly unprecedented. However, upon being faced with the end of days, nobody had paid it much heed any longer.

Upon seeing Elisabeth’s agitation, the man nodded to affirm her fears.

Then as though lecturing a group of incompetents, he solemnly went on.

“I summoned a pair of weaker demons into a man and a woman, then destroyed both their egos. They had two children. Then I bred the children together. By repeating that process, it was possible to create a pure, powerful demon. Eventually, I created a demon powerful enough to meet my needs. Of course, the whole process was a little more involved than merely breeding mice. As you can see, it took me three whole years to reach this point.”

The man hung his head sadly, his heart apparently filled with grief. However, someone stroked his arm to console him. It was the owner of the first voice, the one standing beside the throne.

“It’s okay, Father. Please don’t be sad. We made it, didn’t we? That’s what matters. All’s well that ends well! And really, we’re just getting started!”

The voice belonged to a young girl. She was wearing a blue bondage dress, but it was so covered in ribbons and frills that it was difficult to recognize it as such. In Elisabeth’s opinion, it was a bit much. However, she was certainly cute and girly. Her hair was white, and her eyes were red. It was unclear if it was innate or not, but she seemed somewhat lacking in pigmentation.

Her voice matched her lovely appearance, and her tone was practically singsong.

“I heard your story, Elisabeth. It’s a very sad story. That’s what I think. I’m thinking about you, even if no one in the world is. And you know, I think it

would be better if your story didn't end like that. After all, sad things are sad. No matter how much you patch them up, they still make you want to cry. That's why you'll be able to see them!"

Although the girl was surrounded by the smell of blood, the smile that spread across her face didn't have a hint of malice in it.

She extended her pale hand in front of her, then called out to Elisabeth in a gentle voice.

"I'll help you! I'll help you, Elisabeth! I'll help you meet the people you care about!"

"...Who the hell are you?"

Elisabeth growled out that lone question. The girl stared blankly at her. After she blinked, though, she suddenly grabbed the hem of her skirt. She performed an awkward, yet adorable bow.

"That's right; I have to introduce myself first. That's what you did. So I should do the same. My name is Alice Carroll. I am the ideal girl of men and the sinful harlot who deserves to be stoned. However, that's the name Father gave me, and the words I thought up. My real name, the one I lost, is Sara Yuuki."

"Sara Yuuki? Wait... That strange pronunciation... That self-introduction... No, you can't be—"

"You're the Torture Princess, so... Yes, it would be strange to be the same. Being the exact same would be odd. So as someone who was reincarnated, I suppose I should say it like this: I am..."

The girl let out an amused chuckle.

And with purity in her voice, the girl—the one unburdened by that world's original sin—made her proclamation.

"...the Torture Princess from Another World. The Fremd Torturchen, if you will."

Thus, the curtain rose on a new stage.

On a cruel story, one that may or may not eventually be told as a tale from long, long ago.

It's time for a story.

A story of repentance, dreams—
—and hatred.



Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink